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THE STRANGE GIRL ANSWERED NOT IN WORDS, BUT POINTED UP THE PASS.

THE ROCK RIDER; OR, THE SPIRIT OF THE SIERRA.

A Tale of the Three Parks.

BY CAPTAIN FREDERICK WHITTAKER,
AUTHOR OF "THE RUSSIAN SPY," "THE RED RAJAH," "THE IRISH
CAPTAIN," "DOUBLE-DEATH," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

THE COMRADES.

In the very heart of the Western Continent lie the Rocky Mountains, dividing the land like a vast backbone, shooting out ribs of rock to either ocean. In the heart of the Rocky Mountains repose the Three Parks, the hunter's Paradise.

Now they are inclosed within the bounds of Colorado, but not many years ago they were in that undefined region known as the "Great West." Then the white man was there only on sufferance, and the red king of the soil showed him no mercy, if he found him away from the protection of some friendly tribe. Now the rule is reversed, and the

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red-man only stays on sufferance of the white.

In those doubtful days, not long ago, when the Pacific Railroad was making its first slow approaches from San Francisco, derided by its foes as the enterprise of madmen, and hampered at every step by the want of money, consequent on the just-ended war; and when the Indians, from the long absence of troops from their neighborhood, had become insolent and overbearing all over the plains and mountains, a small party of white men were gathered around a little fire in the center of the lovely South Park.

To the south-west towered the magnificent slopes of Pike's Peak, once the scene of a mingling *furore*, but now deserted and silent. Its lofty summit, crested with snow, towered above the somber growth of pine and spruce that clothed its sides, through which the dark-gray volcanic rocks showed rugged and naked in the red light of the setting sun.

All around the horizon the jagged peaks and spurs of the Sierra shut in the view, inclosing in their frame one of the loveliest valleys in the wide world. Loft perpendicular cliffs, crested with pines, hung over smooth grassy knolls, studded with clumps of trees here and there, with tiny pools scattered between the hollows, reflecting in their bosoms the far-reaching branches of live-oaks, two hundred feet in spread of shadow.

Little copses, gay with flowering shrubs, clustered near some of the clumps of trees, whence the wild deer came fearlessly forth to drink at the pools, while the golden eagle soared from cliff to cliff, loth to rest in his eyrie for the night.

The party of white men were all young and well armed, while the remains of military dress on all, showed them to be soldiers of the great disbanded armies just let loose by the peace.

They were three in number, two in blue, and one in gray.

Frank, hearty soldiers as they were, the war over, they seemed to have fraternized, respecting each other's valor. An additional reason for their companionship could have been gleaned from watching the faces of the three. There was a certain family likeness that denoted that two of them were, at least, near relations, who had fought on opposite sides, and were now friends again.

Confederate and Union, both were handsome young fellows, neither more than twenty-eight, all and slender, fair-haired and hazel-eyed, with the clear-cut aristocratic features that told of good blood and breeding.

The third was a square, stolid-looking German, with a blonde beard, whose breadth of shoulder denoted immense strength, while his sleepy blue eye betokened also a placid temper.

He was intent upon the proper broiling of a turkey leg, which he held over the tiny fire; and said nothing while the other two talked.

Close behind them was one of the enormous live-oaks, draped with moss, its branches drooping to the ground; and as the wind blew toward it, the smoke of their fire became completely lost in the branches before many feet. Under the tree one could hear the occasional stamp of a horse, and the sound of munching provender.

"What's the matter with Belcour this evening, Frank?" asked the young man in the gray coat. "He ought to have been in long ago, if he had any luck in shooting."

"That's just where it is, Jack," answered his cousin, Frank Buford, of West Virginia. "Gustave Belcour never will be a good shot. He's too nervous and excitable for long distances, although I'll admit he's not so bad with a revolver, in a close fight, not more than ten feet off. Then his quickness does him good service. He hasn't shot a thing, you'll see, and we shall have him back in a little while, with a long story of scarce game."

"I should call game pretty thick," said the ex-Confederate, dryly, looking round at the numerous deer and antelopes plainly visible in the valley at no great distance. "A fellow has only to sit here, and let his supper come to him."

"Belcour hasn't been here yet," said Buford, laughing. "He'll scatter them when he comes, you bet. Carl Brinkerhoff won't be able to get another turkey to-morrow, once Belcour comes."

The quiet German made no reply in words. Broiling his bone, as he had been, his sleepy blue eye had nevertheless been roaming over the valley all the time. As Buford ended, he quietly laid down his bone, and picked up a beautiful little sporting rifle that lay beside him.

Without a word he threw up the muzzle, and glanced through the sights at an object ahead of him, several hundred yards off. The crack of the little rifle was immediately followed by a confused struggle and fluttering of the dark object, as Brinkerhoff turned round, saying:

"You fellers vot don't vant no turkey can go mitout. I be de shampion turkey-eater in de States."

He sat quietly down; and almost immediately a scrubby-looking dog, of the most undeniably *car breed*, a yellow dog with a thick tail, his

hide sprinkled with dirty gray, came running out from the shelter of the great live-oak, and came up to the German.

"Yakop," said Brinkerhoff, gravely addressing the dog, "you likes turkey, hein?"

The dog gave a short "wuff" of assent, and wagged his tail, with his eyes fixed lovingly on the bone in his master's hand.

"Nein, das ist nicht recht," said Brinkerhoff, shaking his head. "You don't got no sense to-night, Yakop. I've shot a turkey, you ole fool, und if you vants any supper, you go get him—Hein?"

Yakop seemed to understand every word, for he jumped up and took a long look all around, as if to discover the whereabouts of the turkey, and then turned inquiringly to his master.

"Ach, Gott!" said the German. "Yakop, you don't got no sense to-night. Can't you see vere I lay de cun, mit de parrel bointed straight at him—Hein, you ole tool? You go gets him, kvick, or I take von shtick mit you."

Yakop immediately ran to where the gun lay, and took a bee-line for the dead turkey, which he brought back not ten minutes afterward, dragged triumphantly by the neck. But his tricks were not destined to be much more noticed at the time, for Jack Somers suddenly leaped up from his place, saying:

"By Jove! Frank, there he comes at last, and empty-handed as usual. But what's the matter with him? He rides as if he was in a hurry."

"Indians, perhaps," said the Virginian, coolly. "I'm not going to stir from here for anything less than a whole tribe. Belcour's a little scared, I guess, from his looks."

The German hunter said not a word, but picked up his rifle and threw open the breech, when he put in a new cartridge.

It was his method of preparing to receive strangers.

Buford and Somers shaded their eyes with their hands, and looked up the Park.

There, in the center of a cloud of golden mist, that half-filled the valley, the form of a horse and his rider could be seen, coming at a swinging gallop.

CHAPTER II.

THE SPIRIT OF THE SIERRA.

THE tramp of a horse, with the sharp click that told of a shod hoof, disturbed the usually solemn silence of the passes of the Sierra. Presently, in the midst of those grand solitudes, a horseman made his appearance, coming down a dark canyon, on a narrow ledge about half-way up its sides. Below him, far below, the hoarse murmur of the little stream, that had formed that deep cleft in the course of ages, only served to make the silence elsewhere more noticeable.

The young man was of a face and form likely to arrest attention even in a crowd and in those wild fastnesses he looked doubly handsome.

A little above the medium height and with a form of remarkable grace, the dark rich beauty of his face, the large black eyes, curling raven hair, and trim glossy mustache, gave token of his Southern race, and were set off by a costume exceedingly rich and picturesque, but very unusual in those wild fastnesses.

The stranger's dress was, in fact, more like that of an artist of the Latin Quarter of Paris, or a riding master of the Hippodrome, than that of the rough and ready mountain man. He wore a broad Spanish sombrero, a velvet coat, all slashed and braided, natty white corduroys, and high, gleaming thigh boots of patent leather, with long, silver spurs, while his arms, a carbine and revolvers, were all silver-mounted and of exquisite finish. The housings and furniture of his black horse (a thoroughbred of exquisite beauty) were equally sumptuous, the saddle alone, with its silver studs and Mexican trappings, being worth over a hundred dollars.

Such a gay cavalier had never before been seen in such a place.

He rode slowly and cautiously along, frequently glancing downward into the bed of the stream, and then upward at the rocks around, and there was an expression of vexation on his handsome face.

As he went, he soliloquized in a low tone:

"Belcour, mon ami," he said, "what is the matter with thee to-day, that thou hast shot nothing? The bighorns they laugh at thee, and thou hast not seen one since the morning. Why do they avoid me so? There is stupid Carl Brinkerhoff who goes off with his cur dog, and brings home game every time, and I cannot get so much as a single shot, except so far off, and they going so fast that I miss them. And then, there is Somers, who will be laughing at me for coming in empty-handed, and I—Ha! there he goes!"

He ended abruptly.

His discontented soliloquy was broken up by the sudden leap of one of those graceful mountain sheep, known as the "bighorn" from the huge curling ornaments of his frontlet. The animal came leaping down from the summit of the precipice on the opposite side of the canyon, as if in a desperate hurry, or pursued, and alighted on a pinnacle of rock, about half-way

down the side of the canyon, not fifty feet from the young cavalier.

There it stood poised for an instant, as if equally surprised and dismayed at the meeting with the hunter, and then, gathering itself for a great leap, came flying over the dark canyon to light down almost in front of Horse and rider.

But, swift as the animal was, the aim of the young man was as quick. His rifle was at his back, and he had no time to get it out, but a pistol leaped from the holster like a flash, and leaning over his horse's side, with the rapid aim of instinct alone, he shot the animal through the heart, at five feet distance.

The bighorn reared itself up for a single instant, like a goat, pawed the air wildly, and fell back over the ledge into the stream below, stone dead, as Belcour joyfully exclaimed:

"Shot at last, and well shot, too, Gustave! My friend, thou wilt make a hunter yet. Now, what will Somers say? The animal is dead, without doubt."

He seemed as much pleased as a child, and so he was, for Gustave Belcour, handsome cavalier as he was, had been the butt of his companions all through their roaming expedition for his bad shooting.

He was too nervous and impatient, for the marksman must be cool and plenitie who hopes to be called a "dead shot," and Gustave had become almost disheartened at his own want of success, which was owing merely to the absence of a teacher to instruct him.

His chance shot elated him therefore in proportion to his previous failures.

The next minute, however, his countenance changed, as he looked down the precipice between him and his game.

He saw that the descent was an impossibility, and that the mountain torrent was rapidly sweeping the body away toward the lower ranges of the Sierra.

"Ah, pesto!" he exclaimed, angrily; "but I have no fortune to-day, and shall lose it all if I do not follow. Forward, Eclair, good horse, forward! We will follow while there is foothold left."

And he shook the rein, and trotted on down the narrow ledge, his eyes fixed on the body of the quarry, swept along far below him, now lodging for a moment on a sharp rock, now hurried on again with increased rapidity.

Above him, at the instant he fled, a head, with the long, curving horns of the mountain sheep, was thrust forth for a moment over the precipice. It was instantly withdrawn, and a slight, graceful figure went bounding away over rugged slopes of rock, leaping over dark chasms with wonderful daring and agility, and following the same direction as the hunter, unseen by him.

Gustave rode rapidly down the ledge, and his hopes began to rise, for he perceived that he was approaching the water every moment. The canyon pursued an irregular and winding course, and the ledge grew broader, till at last he uttered a shout of joy, for before him lay a steep slope which appeared to lead to the edge of a waterfall, and there, on the shallow rim of the cataract, lodged against a pointed rock, lay the carcass of his recent game.

But he saw that the sloping ledge was much too steep for his horse, and reined up to dismount.

On the opposite side of the canyon a succession of steep pinnacles formed a sort of pathway of steps, of which each was some twelve feet in height, and a little before him a cross canyon opened its narrow, dark rift, from which a second stream descended, making the waterfall below into a curve.

Just as he pulled up, hesitating how best to descend, the mellow sound of a horn struck on his ear from overhead, and he looked up, wondering whence it came.

He almost threw himself from the horse, with the violent start he gave, at the sight that met his view.

On a lofty pinnacle of rock, relieved against the dark-gray background, looking straight down at him, stood a snow-white figure, of the most unearthly and startling character, combined with a strange beauty that completely enthralled him.

A girl, habited in a species of short, close-fitting tunic of some fleecy white skin, which left all her limbs in perfect freedom, with curly hair of the brightest golden hair floating behind her, was gazing at him, not twenty feet above him, from the most wonderful dark-blue eyes he had ever seen.

But the most singular part of her attire was the head-dress that crowned those bright curly hair, a cap made of the head of the mountain-sheep, and carrying the same huge curling horns, which descended to the wearer's shoulders. In one hand she held the bugle which she had just sounded, and the other bore a double-pointed spear, which she seemed to use as an alpenstock.

As soon as Belcour could speak, he ejaculated, in his native tongue, the words:

"Grand Dieu! Who and what art thou?" The strange girl answered not in words, but pointed up the pass, and waved him away, frowning.

"Nay! I will not go!" cried the ardent Frenchman, impetuously. "I will never go till I know thee better, bright, beautiful spirit! Tell me who thou art?"

For all answer the girl went to the side of the cross canyon, and stood at the edge of the dizzy precipice. Then she waved him back once more forbiddingly, and made as if to leap into the black gulf.

"In God's name, hold!" cried Belcour, frantically, and he hastily leaped from his horse, as if he would spring across the chasm that separated them.

The next moment the white figure leaped from the summit of the precipice into the depths of the black canyon, and disappeared from his view.

And not a sound disturbed the stillness of the mountain-side, but the swash and roar of the torrent below him.

"Ah! mon Dieu, I have killed her!" groaned Belcour, as she disappeared.

He rushed madly down the slope to the water-fall, and looked up the line of the cross canyon.

Not a living thing met his view, but, a deep black pool at the very edge of the waterfall seemed to show him the grave of the unfortunate girl, and Gustave shuddered all over.

"So young, so beautiful!" he groaned; "and I have killed her."

At that very instant the wild, solemn notes of the horn came to his ear from a fresh quarter.

He turned round, in greater amazement than ever, to see whence it came, and faintly ejaculated:

"Grand Dieu! It must be a spirit."

The waterfall at whose edge he stood was at least a hundred feet in depth, and emptied into a tremendous gorge, a continuation of the one he was in, but far grander. Cliffs six hundred feet in height shut in the gorge on each side, and below all was pitch dark, while above stunted trees clung to the crevices of the rocks and climbed toward the narrow strip of sky.

Standing on a jagged stunted tree, dead and bare of leaves, that shot out horizontally from the midst of the cliff, stood the mysterious white figure of the girl, waving her spear forlornly at him.

Belcour imploringly extended his arms to her, crying:

"Oh, beautiful creature, do not stay there! You will fall and be dashed to pieces. For Heaven's sake, hear me!"

No sooner had he uttered the words than the white figure leaped from the bare tree into the giddy void like a bird, and seemed to swing herself with perfect ease to another tree at least a hundred feet distant.

Then, as if to cap the climax, she turned and disappeared into the solid rock, into whose bosom she vanished as if she had never been there, and all that Belcour could see was the bare mountain-side, with the spike-like trunks shooting out here and there, and a vulture winging its way across the strip of sky above.

With a strange sensation of awe and bewilderment, the young man turned round, forgetting even his dead game, climbed up the path, mounted his horse and galloped away.

His superstition was at last excited.

"It must be the Spirit of the Sierra that the Indians told us of!" he muttered. "No mortal creature could leap a hundred feet from tree to tree."

And he never ceased his rapid gallop till he was out of the dark shadows of the solemn mountains, and into the free valley of the South Park.

There at last he tried to shake off the feeling of terror that had overcome him, and galloped as fast as he could to the live-oak tree where his friends were watching for him.

With pale face and trembling accents he ejaculated:

"Mes amis, I have seen the Spirit of the Sierra!"

CHAPTER III.

THE ROCK RIDER.

At the moment when Belcour left the mountains and galloped up to the live-oak tree, he was beheld, miles away, by an eye whose keenness few, red or white, could equal.

A man of remarkable height, exaggerated by his excessive lankness, stood at the entrance of a dark cave, that opened into a short gully, high up the side of the sierra.

His face, with great burning blue eyes, high aquiline features, thin to emaciation and framed in straight black hair, with mustaches of very great length, strongly resembled the portraits of the famous knight of La Mancha, both in outline and expression.

His figure, lank and bony, was equally in keeping, his dress that of the mountain hunters, but peculiarly tight and scanty in cut. On his head he wore a tall conical cap of fur, that increased his gigantic appearance, and he leaned on a long lance while he carefully scanned the valley below.

This singular-looking man was soliloquizing in a low voice as he gazed.

"Strangers in the valley once more, and I never thought to see human face again, save poor faithful Cato, and the red lords of the

prairie. They must be mad to come here thus, when the chiefs of the South make their path through the very place where they are sitting. Must I never rest from my labors? I thought so fondly that Heaven would send me my child, could I but remain one year without slaughter, and now I see the red blood coming in floods, and I must bathe in it once more, to save my own color."

His great, solemn eyes glared with the light of madness as he spoke the last words, and he suddenly threw himself flat on the ground, and seemed to listen intently. In a moment more he started up, crying:

"I knew it! My visions never deceived me; and last night I heard the voice of the Spirit calling to me: 'Ride! ride! Blood comes!'"

He seemed to be dreadfully excited, for his senses, sharpened by insanity, had caught the sound of hoofs far away among the passes of the Sierra. He called aloud:

"Cato! Cato! Bring out Mountaineer, quick!

The Rock Rider must be at his red work again, for the heathen are about, and I am the protector of the helpless."

In answer to the call came stumping out of the cave a figure about as different from the other as could be imagined: a short, stout negro, with bandy legs, who appeared to be as strong as a bull, and carried on his shoulders a broad, good-humored face, generally on the grin.

Now, however, it bore an expression of superstitious terror, ludicrous to see, and the whites of the eyes showed plainly in their wide glare, as he ejaculated:

"Oh, marse cappen! Oh, de Lord, sweet marse cappen! Is you gwine away again wid dem horr'ble debbils? Oh, marse cappen, don't ye do it, ef ye lub old Cato! Oh, marse cappen, you doesn't know nuffin' bout how I feels when you is gwine away, and dem awful-lookin' heads is a-lookin' at me all de time wid deir shiny eyes, and grins wid deir teeth and groans so—oh-h-h! Marse cappen, don't ye go, or else take me wid ye." And Cato fell on his knees by the side of the gaunt man, shivering as if he had the ague.

The other looked down on him with a strange look, in which pity and remorse seemed to be blended with some overmastering purpose.

"Poor child of clay," he said, "knowest thou not that when the tale of heads is complete, thou and I shall be free again, and once more see our darling? I would that I could let thee go with me but thou knowest our enemies. The crafty wolf and the filthy buzzard would crowd to the feast, and our heads would be gone forever if we both left. No, 'tis thy place to guard the Cavern of Death, 'tis mine to bring in the victims, for I am the avenger of innocent blood. Bring out my charger, for I must ride forth."

He ended in a sterner tone of voice, with a slight frown, and Cato rose up, still trembling, and disappeared into the cavern. In a few minutes he returned, leading a tall mule, at least sixteen hands in height, of the same lank conformation as its master.

It was saddled and bridled, and the tall man mounted it slowly, and then sat there, looking at Cato for a minute.

"Cato," he said, gravely, "it is the duty of a true squire to follow his knight, if so be there is a castellan to guard the castle. I have promoted thee, boy. Thou art castellan. See to my castle. Bring me my buckler."

Once more poor Cato fell on his knees imploringly.

"Oh, marse cappen, not dat, for de lub of heaven! Ask Cato anyting but dat. Dat ar' ugly t'ing wid de dead face on him, he send de cold shudders all troo me. And when you gets him you goes—oh! de Lord knows whar—and I neber sees you any more. Yah! marse cappen, don't look so drefful!"

"The buckler, dog! The buckler, or I pin thee to the rock!" suddenly vociferated the other, raising the long lance in anger; and Cato as suddenly leaped up, and vanished into the cavern as nimblly as a squirrel.

In a moment more he reappeared, bearing with averted face, a large, round Indian shield of buffalo hide, which was so unusually thick as to show that two of them had been bound together.

But the ornament in the center of the shield was of the most ghastly character conceivable. It was the face of a dead woman, pinched and white, with wide-open, staring eyes, and teeth revealed by parted lips. A few locks of gray hair were neatly parted on the forehead, and it seemed as if the whole mask of the face had been severed from the front of the head and set on the shield, preserved as a mummy, for a real face, and of a white woman it undoubtedly was.

The strange being on the gaunt mule took the shield from the hands of his sable attendant, and regarded the dead face silently for several minutes. Gradually the tears began to roll down his cheeks, and his gaunt features worked convulsively.

"Cato," he said, in a deep, broken voice, "this face, now withered and gray, was once the face of a bright, blooming girl. One night changed it to this. Some men would have revenged such wrongs on the whole race that had

wronged him, but she had told me not to take life, save only in a righteous quarrel, to save life. Cato, I have obeyed her, and God has taken care of me. While this shield covers me, all the red-men of the Sierra can not harm me, for they know the white face of her whom they have wronged. So God defend the right."

And he deliberately pressed his lips to those of the dead face, with a strange expression of religious fervor, mingled with knightly enthusiasm.

Cato shuddered and groaned, as he saw his master do it, and then the other threw the shield over his left arm and cried:

"Now, I am again the Rock Rider of the Sierra, and let all the sons of the prairie beware! Forward!"

The gaunt mule set off at once at a round trot down the gully, and turned sharp off to the right, where the way seemed impassable to any but a mountain goat.

But, as if used to it, the animal kept up the same rapid pace, leaping from rock to rock, and bounding over chasms that seemed madness to attempt.

And all the while the gaunt figure of the Rock Rider sat erect, with shield and lance, like a knight of old, regardless of the eccentric movements of his mount, and with seat undisturbed, till he had arrived at the summit of a cliff, looking down into a dark gorge that entered the valley.

Then he halted and surveyed the gorge with a grim smile.

"I knew it," he said.

A party of twenty or thirty Indians, all evidently chiefs, from their rich dresses, were descending the gorge into the South Park.

The Rock Rider reined up and elevated his stentorian voice in the Comanche language, crying:

"The sons of the prairie are lost in the mountain. Back to your homes, or meet the wrath of the Rock Rider!"

Then with a wheel of the gaunt mule, he held up to their view the round shield, so that the face of the dead woman glared down on the chiefs.

CHAPTER IV.

THE WARNING.

The appearance of the Rock Rider, as he sat on his mule at the top of the rock, was singularly weird and imposing. The sun was setting directly behind his back, and his whole figure stood out, black as jet, against the red glare.

Over his head, as if scenting the slaughter to come, with the wild instinct of its race, a black buzzard hovered; and several others could be seen winging their slow flight thither in the still evening air.

A Comanche chief aimed straight at the heart of the stranger, and pulled the trigger.

The Rock Rider uttered a taunting laugh, as the bullet struck the shield and glanced off again.

"Too low, too low, good master chief," he shouted across the ravine, in hollow tones. "The sights of a Spencer rifle were never made for a clumsy Indian to understand. Beware of the Rock Rider's lance, for the priest blessed it to a mission of vengeance. The Comanche's race has been run."

Even as he spoke, three more rifles cracked, with better aim, for a ball from one of them passed through the tall cap and knocked it off.

A peal of laughter, louder than before, came from the grim stranger, as he shouted:

"Fire away till your powder gives out. You can not hurt the Rock Rider of the Sierra. He laughs at the Comanche, and spits on the Cheyenne. Black Wolf is wanted in hell, to atone for the death of the white girl he slew in Texas three moons ago."

He cast down the long lance as he spoke, and Black Wolf, one of the Comanche chiefs, fell from his horse, dead, and pinned to the earth.

"The Rock Rider never sends lance twice," shouted the stranger. "Beware of your lives, for not one of ye shall return to the lodge of his tribe, if he is found in the Sierra to-night."

Then he stooped from his mule with hardly an effort, picked up his tall cap, which he set upon his head, and glared down on them. He sat calmly, exposed to the fire of all, the smoke curling up around him from the lately discharged rifles, as if holding them all in utter contempt. In truth, the glare of the sun in their eyes, and the deceptive distance, made him a most difficult target.

A third time the Indians fired a volley, and a third time the wild Rock Rider laughed tauntingly, as he sat, statue-like, in the sunset.

"The bullet for me is not yet cast," he shouted back, in the same hollow tones as ever. "Let the chiefs heed my warning, and go back to their homes to-night."

The next moment he wheeled his mule around, and was gone, the edge of the precipice hiding him from view. The Indians looked at one another with awe-stricken faces.

"The man has been punished by the Manitou," said Red Lightning, in a low voice. "The Master of Life has clouded his brain, and cast the shadow of his wing over his head to protect him. Three did I aim for his heart, and three

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did the bullet fly wide, that never erred before."

"Let us return home," said Black Arrow, another chief. "The Manitou has guarded the Three Parks, as the chief of the Cheyennes told us."

"Not till we have killed the pale-face fools who have stolen in upon our ancient hunting-ground," said Red Lightning, doggedly. "If they can enter, so can we. What! Shall we let the squaws laugh at us when we come back and tell them that twenty chiefs of the Comanches fled from four hunters, who had never been in the mountains before? There are four scalps in yonder valley, and Red Lightning has sworn to have one of them. Let who will stay. I go forward."

He turned his spotted mustang as he spoke, and galloped down the pass into the valley of the South Park, just as the purple twilight began to deepen.

The other chiefs followed, as a matter of course, for although obedience on the war-path is wholly voluntary, yet the sentiments of pride and honor become equally binding under a renowned leader. And Red Lightning was one of the most renowned braves of his tribe. He had slain at different times six United States soldiers, and was girt with a perfect armory of revolvers from their spoils, besides wearing a saber.

But, though a skillful warrior, the mysteries of the white men's weapons were too much for him, and more than half of his revolvers were rusty and unloaded, or so much out of order as to be useless.

Still, he and his followers presented a formidable appearance as they rode into the valley on the trail of the four comrades who had entered it so gayly but a few days before, having, by wonderful luck, escaped danger so far.

The Indians kept themselves behind the shelter of a clump of trees, and went into camp, as the darkness grew on, without lighting any fires, simply halting their horses and turning them loose.

It was too dark to follow the trail, and the chiefs spent their time in smoking the council-pipe.

Red Lightning alone stole off on foot up the valley, pausing to reconnoiter at the summit of every knoll.

CHAPTER V.

UNDER THE LIVE-OAK.

WHEN our four hunters heard the volleys which were fired at the wild Rock Rider, they were somewhat disturbed.

They had been so quiet hitherto in the paradise of the South Park that they had almost forgotten the dangers that surrounded them. Not one of them had ever been on the plains before, and their whole knowledge of Indians was derived from books, and from the degenerate specimens found in frontier towns.

Still they were all active, keen-eyed young fellows, used to war, splendidly armed, and really ran less danger than one might have supposed.

"Boys," said Jack Somers, "there's a row in the valley. What's to be done?"

"Stay here," said Frank Buford, coolly. "I'd like to see the force of Indians that can get us out of that tree, if we've a mind to defend ourselves. What do you say, Belcour?"

"I stay here," said the young Frenchman, firmly, "till I have solved the mystery of the Spirit of the Sierra. If the Indians come, I will soon send them packing back."

"How?" demanded Somers, a little incredulously. "Do you think that your shooting is so superior? You haven't shown it yet."

Somers was renowned for a specialty. That specialty was pistol-shooting. He gloried in his proficiency, and was very jealous of any one who tried to dispute the palm in that.

Gustave Belcour smiled.

"Nay, Jack, our best shot at a long range is old Carl here, and thou canst beat us all with the revolver. But I have a specialty, too. Behold it."

As he spoke he drew from his girdle a Colt's revolver, put it to his mouth, and, to all appearance, swallowed it.

"Jack Somers," cried a hollow voice, close behind the young man's head, at the same instant, "look out for your scalp."

The young fellow turned hastily round, started out of his wits, and a high, squeaking voice verhead, in the branches of the live-oak, again costed him with the question:

"Does your mother know you're out?"

Both Somers and Buford looked wonderingly round them, when Belcour burst out laughing.

"You see, boys, I have a specialty, too. I've astonished you, and that's nothing to what I can do."

"Why, are you a conjuror?" asked both in a breath.

"Pretty fair," returned Belcour, modestly: "enough to scare an Indian. You see that I always liked to amuse myself with magic, and finished up my education in that line under Hartz, in New York. I thought it might prove useful to me here, and we shall soon see if it

does not. I shall not be the least useful member of the firm yet, perhaps."

Brinkerhoff, who had not yet spoken, during the conversation was sweeping the line of the Sierra to the south with a powerful glass. He shut it up now, and quietly observed:

"Fellers, I fights mit you, bote I dinks ve haf moch droubles. Dere ist swanzig Indians comen hier, and der teufel on der rocks fightin' mit dem. You looks for yourself."

Buford took the glass and pointed it to the place indicated by the German. He could distinctly see the weird figure of the Rock Rider, as he sat there, defying the Indians below.

He saw, too, the stranger riding away along the edges of precipices, among sharp rocks, as if he bore a charmed life, till the darkness and the mouth of a black canyon swallowed him up together.

Then the four comrades held a short consultation, which ended in extinguishing their little fire, and taking to the shelter of the live-oak tree, where they secured their horses and retired to their respective nests for the night.

The four had resolved to set a guard, however, and Brinkerhoff offered to take the first tour of duty, accompanied by his learned dog, Yakop.

For some hours the German was undisturbed in his watch. He knew that the Indians were near, and had heard enough of their wiles to be suspicious of every sound.

Still he knew also that the secrecy of their retreat was likely to save them from discovery for that night at least, as the moon was finishing her last quarter, and the nights were very dark.

The hours wore on in silence, and Yakop was quietly reposing by his master's feet, when the watching hunter caught sight of a dark moving figure, standing out against the sky at the top of a knoll, not three hundred yards off.

It moved as silently as a ghost, but the keen eyes of Carl were not to be deceived.

The figure moved stealthily forward and halted at the summit of the knoll, revealing the plumed head-dress and long flowing buffalo-robe of an Indian chieftain.

A moment before Carl had been nodding at his post, but the sight was too novel to him and too startling to permit longer inattention. It was the first wild Indian he had ever seen.

Softly he laid his hand on Yakop's back, and the intelligent dog started up in a moment, without a whine or bark.

That he saw the Indian was evident from a certain stiffening of the back, and he kept his eyes intently riveted upon the savage.

The Indian remained on the summit of the knoll for a minute or more, peering round the valley. Then he turned and stalked away toward the Sierra at the eastern side.

Carl waited till he was out of sight behind the knoll, when he rose up and softly wakened his three companions, to whom he told what had happened.

The news woke them up effectually, and there was no more talk of sleeping that night.

That Indians were near them and on the alert was certain now. How many were near, was another question, and one hard to answer.

Silently they descended from their perches, and each man saddled his horse, leaving the bridle on the horn of the saddle.

There was nothing further to do then but to wait for morning, and keep a good look-out.

But when they came to look out over the valley, a circumstance was discovered which alarmed the four comrades exceedingly.

Yakop was gone.

In vain they looked around in all directions, and made low signals to attract the dog's attention. They dared not call aloud or whistle, for no one knew who might be near.

But all the care and search they could make was unrewarded. Yakop was undoubtedly missing.

"The stupid dog!" muttered Somers, wrathfully. "If the Indians catch sight of him, it's all up. They'll know it's a white man's dog, and follow him when he comes back. You ought never to have brought him here, Carl. He's only in the way."

"Don't you never mind 'bout Yakop," said Brinkerhoff, quietly. "You don't got so much sense as Yakop to-night, mein herr. Yakop be go off to see vere de Indians vos sleep, and Yakop he come back mit de news. You see fery soon, Shack."

"Mes amis," said Gustave Belcour, suddenly, "if a dog can do such things, we ought not to be behind. I'm going to take a look at the Indians myself. Stay here till I come back."

"Und I be going after Yakop," said Carl Brinkerhoff. "De leedle cuss might get ir to a fight und get vipped by dems Indians. So I goes to see after mein leedle tog."

And without more ado the German and the Frenchman departed on their hazardous expedition, leaving the two cousins to defend the tree as they best might.

CHAPTER VI.

BELCOUR'S LUKE.

WHEN Gustave Belcour started on foot from the old live-oak tree where he and his compa-

nions had built their nest in safety, he had no very clear idea of where he was going. Had he been an American his native caution would have reminded him that union was strength, division weakness.

But Belcour was an impetuous Frenchman, young, brave to rashness, and endowed with a profound contempt for the Indians, a profound confidence in his own resources. All that he had seen of Indians, all that he had heard from the keen, self-reliant frontiersmen he had met, had made him think of the former as cowards, degraded creatures, of whom a dozen were no match for a single determined white man.

Moreover he relied on their superstition and his own tricks of magic to frighten them away if they became too numerous.

Very rash, the reader will say.

True, but fortune favors the brave, often when they don't deserve it.

Once away from the tree, Belcour advanced with mingled boldness and caution that was very creditable to a man totally uneducated in wood-craft.

He kept in the hollows between the different knolls, incessantly glancing up against the sky-line, on the watch for foes.

He moved slowly and noiselessly, his gun ready on full cock, a pair of revolvers in the belt, close to his hand.

For nearly a mile he saw nothing.

Then the snap of a dry stick in his immediate vicinity warned him that others were abroad.

Instantly the young man sank down to the earth, where he was, and remained perfectly silent, listening intently.

For some moments not a sound disturbed the silence. If it were a wild animal that had made the noise, it must have halted, alarmed at its own carelessness.

If it were a human being the pause was just as significant.

Gustave Belcour waited, with suspended breath, his ear close to the ground, with a patience worthy of an old hunter.

Presently he distinguished a soft, almost imperceptible rustle. It was the sound of a moccasined foot on damp grass.

It came from the other side of a knoll, at the foot of which he lay, and the knoll was crowned with a gigantic live-oak, with drooping branches.

By intent, breathless listening, he could ascertain that the steps were approaching the summit of the knoll.

Quietly he rose up to a kneeling posture, and prepared himself to exercise the art which he had studied so well.

In a moment more he was greeted with a view of the lofty plumes of an Indian warrior, rising over the summit of the knoll, as he had expected.

But there was more than that.

To his surprise, mingled with apprehension, a score of dark forms rose up at the same instant, and all were Indians. There was a low murmur of voices, as if the new-comer was being greeted and questioned, and a great deal of silent gesticulation.

Then, too, for the first time, Belcour heard the snort of a horse on the other side of the knoll.

He realized that, without knowing it, he had stumbled on the very camp of the Indians who had come into the valley. They had been asleep till now, but their scout had returned. Would he be able to get off as quietly as he had come, now that the marvelously acute senses of the wild warriors were fully awake?

The cold sweat stood on his brow, as he mentally answered the question in the negative.

These fellows that he was looking at, were very different from the degenerate half-breeds he had seen lying drunk in the streets of Omaha.

In spite of his danger, Belcour could not help a thrill of admiration, as he surveyed the athletic and graceful forms of the Comanche chiefs, outlined against the sky. There was not one that might not have served as a model for an Apollo, and their stately and dignified bearing toward each other, as the unseen watcher marked it, would have put to shame the most courteous gentleman of civilization.

Plainly these were the real kings of the mountain and prairie, and had never suffered from white contact.

But Belcour knew well enough also that they nourished a hatred against his race that rendered it a hazardous place for him. He must get away from there somehow, and now was the time to try his art.

With a great effort he threw his voice into the tree, above the heads of the Indians, uttering, in English, the words:

"What are you doing here?"

The effect was immediate and surprising.

The Indians recoiled from the conron center, as if a shell had been dropped into their midst, and twenty weapons were ready in eager hands, pointing up into the tree.

Plainly they suspected an enemy just where he wished them, and the ventriloquist followed up the stratagem by a diabolical laugh, which he contrived to send into another part of the tree, at the further side of the knoll.

Instantly the flash and crack of a rifle was

followed by the snapping of a bullet through the trees, in the very place where he had sent his voice.

Belcour repeated the laugh in the very same place, and then started up. As he had anticipated, half a dozen rifles followed suit, and several Indians caught hold of the branches to ascend and examine the tree. Seizing the opportunity with the marvelous quickness of the trained conjuror, the young man stole instantly off down the hollow, under cover of the noise and confusion, which prevented his foes from observing his footsteps, and very soon put a second knoll between him and the Indians.

He could hear them rattling the branches, and talking aloud together, with a want of caution strikingly unlike his own notions of Indian character, and which proved that they must have been greatly excited by the mysterious voice.

And then, of a sudden, everything was quiet. Belcour halted instantly, laid down, and listened.

For some time all was still, and then he heard the low, muffled tramp of a number of horses. Covered by that, he started up again, and stole off through the hollows, without any very clear idea of where he was going, except to get away from there.

The noise of trampling hoofs grew more and more distinct, and the young Frenchman quickened his pace to a run, following only the line of hollows, and keeping between the knolls.

As far as regarded concealment, it was a wise course. He remained perfectly invisible. But, unknowingly, every step took him further and further away from his camp, and when he rested at last, he found that he was in a part of the valley with which he was totally unacquainted, where the trees were much thicker, and where the only landmark he could recognize was the giant range of the Sierra, at whose foot he unexpectedly found himself.

The discovery was something of a shock to the young fellow.

Had he had his horse with him, it would have mattered less, but on foot, and being quite out of walking practice lately, he began to feel tired and helpless. Under the circumstances, he took a sensible course.

Ascending the mountain a little higher, where a belt of coppice and timber clothed the spurs of the Sierra, he ensconced himself in a sheltered place, from whence he could see the whole of the valley, and silently awaited the coming of day.

He had not long to wait. His excursion had carried him over more ground, and through a longer period of time than he had calculated on; and already a faint, doubtful light began to steal over the landscape, the first precursor of coming day.

From his position, a little elevated above the valley, he could see nothing in the gloom below. The tactics of the vidette by night and by day are very different.

But he could hear, every now and then, the distant snort of a horse and the dull trampling of feet, that told him that the Indians were stirring about.

Gradually the light became stronger, and Belcour looked up the side of the mountains. Sharp and clear stood out the rugged tops against a sky that was already blushing pink with early dawn.

Below him the trampling continued, and after awhile he began to hear voices in low conversation. Still the light increased, and as he looked down, he saw the whole valley covered with a thick white veil of mist, out of which the trees rose up like islands in a sea.

Belcour rose and went higher up the mountain. Where he was, every thing was bright and clear. Only the valley was obscured with mist. The young man reasoned correctly when he thought the same mist would hide him from the observation of any one below.

He passed through the belt of coppice, and emerged on the naked side of the mountain, at the edge of a steep, stony ravine, between two spurs of the chain, where a winter's torrent had hewn its pathway down the side of the ravine.

A few rocks formed a sort of natural breast-work, behind which, safe from observation, he could survey the valley. As he looked down and listened, the noise of horses' feet became quite plain on the greensward. The veil of white mist seemed to be thicker and thicker, as the light strengthened. Every now and then a breeze would send clouds of vapor rolling along, curling into various fantastic forms, and behind its curtain he could now hear voices quite plainly, calling to each other.

But the voices were not those of Indians.

With a strange mingling of amusement and terror, he recognized his friends, the two cousins, Buford and Somers.

"Eh! *Mon Dieu!*" muttered Belcour to himself; "but we are four fools, I must say. Here am I in one place, Brinkerhoff somewhere else, and Buford and Somers playing hide and seek in the fog below, as if a war-party were nowhere within hearing. Ah, ah! there comes the sun at last!"

As he spoke, a bright crimson glow tipped

the summits of the Sierra on the opposite side of the valley, and began to steal rapidly down over the rocks.

The white mist in the valley curled closer than ever.

Gustave Belcour turned away to look up the mountain side again, and the prospect was glorious. The sky was all aglow with scarlet and gold, and the rocks stood out as black as jet against it. Sharp pinnacles of granite, like rows of needles, seemed to be too narrow to afford footing even for the mountain goat.

And yet, there, in the very center of the glow at the summit of the pass, her statuesque form relieved against the sky, stood the same beautiful figure that he had seen the night before, the mysterious being that he only knew as the Spirit of the Sierra.

CHAPTER VII.

THE CAVERN OF DEATH.

THE shades of evening had gathered over the Sierra, and the Indians were gone from the pass where Black Wolf had been killed, when the cautious click of the mule's hoofs broke the stillness, and the gaunt, unearthly figure of the Rock Rider made its appearance at the summit of the gorge. In a moment more he came trotting slowly down the pass, with the fearful pale face on the round shield gleaming through the darkness.

There, in the midst of the gorge, lay the dead warrior, pinned to the ground by the unerring lance of the weird stranger, his sightless eyes glaring up at the stars in the evening sky, all alone.

His companions had left him, an unusual thing with Indians, who are scrupulous to carry off their dead on most occasions.

The Rock Rider went up to the lance, still standing in the ground, and muttered:

"Another life gone, another victim to his own crimes. Oh, children of the prairie, how often would I have forgiven ye *my* wrongs, but ye would keep at the foul task of murder and rape. Black Wolf in name and nature, thou shouldst thank me that saved thee from the gallows-tree, and set thee among the nobles and princes that fell before the arm of the Rock Rider. Ride on to the hunting grounds of thy fathers in peace, and thy head shall be honored by a place in the Cavern of Death."

As he spoke, he wrenched away the spear from its place, and stuck it again in the ground. Then he stooped down from the saddle, with a long knife in his hand, with which he made but a single slash at the neck of the dead Indian.

In another moment he was up again, and dangling from his hand was seen a human head!

He replaced the knife in his girdle, plucked up the spear once more, and set upon the point the ghastly trophy.

"It is finished," muttered the Rock Rider. "God receive thy soul, and cleanse it from evil in the purifying flames of purgatory."

The strange being turned away his mule, and rode up the pass again, the round dark head on the spear-point relieved against the sky.

The tramp of the gaunt mule echoed up the gorge to the summit, when mule and rider turned into a black canyon and disappeared.

Minutes passed away in total silence, when the tramp was again heard, this time on the summit of the cliffs.

Presently the two dark figures appeared against the sky, with the terrible trophy of death at the end of the spear. The Rock Rider and his gaunt steed appeared to tread on air at times, so closely did they approach the edge of the precipices, and then they went bounding over chasms, and stepping from point to point of needle-like pinnacles, till they both reached a broad slope that seemed to climb to the summit of a lofty peak, which was furrowed here and there with deep, black ravines.

Into one of these ravines both jumped, and drew up before the entrance of the same cavern whence they had started a few hours before.

Then the deep voice of the Rock Rider shouted:

"Cato! Cato! Where are you, imbecile?"

A faint, stuttering voice was heard from the gorge behind, some distance from the black mouth of the cave.

"Here, marse cappen. Oh! bress de Lord, you isn't dead, and po' Cato isn't luff alone fo'-ever! Oh, bress de Lord, marse cappen!"

Then the hurrying steps of the negro were heard up the gorge, and he came running out of the darkness to hold his master's bridle.

"How is this, Cato?" demanded the Rock Rider, sternly. "Why have you left your post in the Cavern of Death?"

"Oh, marse cappen," began Cato, shivering, "I done gone in dar once, but oh, marse cappen, 'twas awful, sah, awful! De heads dey groan, and de debbil he be at work at dem, *shu'h*, for po' Cato hear 'em a-groanin' and talkin' to each oder; yes, marse cappen, so he did now, *shuah*, and I isn't no liar, sah."

"Fool," said the Rock Rider, harshly. "Twas but the wind groaning through the crevices. Go in and light the fire on the altar, for I have found a fresh guest for the Cavern of Death."

Cato dropped on his knees trembling, and ejaculated:

"Oh, marse cappen, honey sweet marse cappen, don't you make me go in dar, sah! De debbil in dar, *shuah*, for I hear um scuttering roun' dar quite lively, so I did, sah. Don't you go for to make me do no sich t'ings, marse cappen, or fo' God, I isn't gwine to—Yah-h-h-h!"

He ended with a howl that might have been heard a mile, as the Rock Rider, without a word, lowered the ghastly head on the point of the lance, till the cold flesh touched his cheek.

Cato leaped up as if he had been struck with a whip, yelling louder than ever, but his master cut him short sternly.

"Into the cavern, fool! Am I to wait all night? Quick, or I will call forth the spirits to seize thee."

The last threat appeared to decide Cato, for he scuttled into the cavern at a rapid pace, and the Rock Rider slowly dismounted from his mule and turned the animal loose, when it walked into the cave after the negro.

Presently a faint red light glimmered from the interior, and almost immediately it was followed by a fearful howl from Cato, as some black thing dashed past him, and ran out of the cavern.

As quick as thought the long knife of the Rock Rider was out, and he made a bold cut at the dark object as it shot by him.

A sort of agonized yell, instantly stifled, followed; and a dead wolf lay at the feet of the solitary, while Cato came running out, howling.

"See, doit," said the Rock Rider, fiercely. "Nothing but a coyote, and thou bast let him into the sanctuary. Back and light the flame, or I'll cast thee over the cliffs into the valley. Quick, I say!"

Again Cato entered the cavern, this time very slowly and unwillingly. Thrice he returned, and thrice did his master drive him in by threats.

At last he dashed desperately in, saying:

"Well, den, marse cappen, if I'se a dead nigger to-morrow mornin', 'tain't my fault—so now!"

In a few moments more the same red glimmering flame was seen in the interior of the cave, and not till then did the Rock Rider advance.

He followed the glimmer of that flame through a long, winding cavern full of side recesses, in one of which the sound of the mule's teeth munching at fodder was plainly audible. Ahcad was a low archway in the solid rock, and beyond it stood a cubical block of stone, on the summit of which burned a bright flame, that seemed to illuminate a second cavern.

Into this light emerged Cato, hurrying desperately toward the entrance of the cavern, with an expression of ghastly fear on his black face.

But the sight of his terrible master coming toward him, holding out on the presented spear the grinning head of the Indian warrior, seemed to quench all desire in Cato to go further in that direction. The negro recoiled to the side of the altar, where he fell on his knees, the picture of abject terror; and slowly the Rock Rider entered the Cavern of Death.

It was well named.

A large, round cavern, with a lofty roof, the light of the fire was insufficient to illuminate the intense blackness of darkness that brooded over every side and the ceiling, out of its influence.

The stone altar was made of a single white stalagmite, fashioned by the hand of man into its present shape; and the faint drip, drip of water at long intervals in the recesses of the cavern announced that others were in the process of formation.

Out of the black darkness overhead white, ghostly forms leaned down, which were nothing but stalactites, and out of the darkness around a troop of pale statues seemed fitting, under the flickering light of the fire.

But around the altar itself was the most ghastly assembly of all.

Standing erect, leaning against white stalagmites, and apparently as fresh as if just killed, a row of human bodies, *all headless*, met the view, dressed in the costume of Indian warriors. On the ground before each of them lay the head which had belonged to it in life, plumed and painted as if on the war-path, and the weapons of each, all firearms, lay beside the heads.

The Rock Rider stepped into the circle, and drove the butt of the spear into a crevice of the rock, while the head remained grinning aloft, when the strange being addressed the motionless circle.

He leaned the round shield against the altar, where the pale face remained staring up at him, and spoke in his deep, powerful voice:

"Warriors and chiefs, once owners of this broad continent, I bring a fresh guest for your circle to-night. The black buzzard of the prairie flew to the mountain to-day and hovered above my head, and I knew from the voice of the wind that death was coming to Sierra. Chiefs and warriors, ye know how the Rock Rider has hated blood, and how often he has

The Rock Rider.

been compelled to shed it. Tell me only where my little one has gone, and the red-man shall roam free of the Rock Rider's spear. Refuse, and I must e'en go on with my task, till the last chief of your tribes has fallen to avenge the death of my beloved one."

Then the wild being took up the shield and held it aloft, so that the face was slowly turned around the circle.

"Look at them, beloved," said the Rock Rider, in a strange tone of joy. "If vengeance belonged to man, have I not avenged thee? See the form of the Coiling Snake, the same that struck thee, my own. I met him in fair fight, with the lance of a true knight against the stolen rifle of the pale-face, and he went down. I remembered thee, and offered him life, if he would tell me where he had hidden our little one. But the red liar said that he knew not, and I slew him. One by one they have fallen, Comanche, Cheyenne, Arapahoe and the tiger of the South, the cruel Apache. See where they stand, awaiting the resurrection. I slew them like men, and they died like wolves. And now I bring thee the worst of all, Black Wolf."

He laid down his shield as he spoke, and detached the head of the slain warrior from the spear-point.

He held it up and addressed the silent circle once more.

"Chiefs and warriors, behold Black Wolf, the Comanche chief. He was a coward and a murderer of women. Not many moons ago he led a party to swoop down on a peaceful cottage. He brained the child in its cradle, and slew the mother, when the father was away. Like the wolf he ravened. Like the wolf he died, impaled. His body lies in the pass, to fatten the buzzard and the crow. His is fit company for wicked chiefs and warriors until ye repent. Let him lie there till the trumpet sounds."

He laid the head down in the center of the circle, and then turned to Cato, saying:

"Old servant and friend, we have finished for to night, and the Rock Rider must away again. Death is around us, for the night-hawk screams in the valley. Cato, the time is coming when we shall find her, for I saw her in my dreams twice last night. God knows I would not slay more if I could, but they would not heed my command. The red wolves are in the valley to destroy the white strangers, and I must save them. 'Tis no sin to take life to save a better life. Come."

He took up the shield and lance as he spoke, and stalked from the cavern into the outer one.

Cato had been kneeling there, shivering, all the while, his lips moving, as if he was praying for safety, his eyes fixed on vacancy. The negro was fairly benumbed with superstitious terror.

As the Rock Rider turned to depart, the poor darkey uttered a deep groan of relief, which was distinctly echoed from the back of the cavern. Cato's wool bristled up on his head. He leaped to his feet, cast a single terrified glance round him, and rushed from the inner cavern to where his master was standing, watching the gaunt mule finish its feed.

There the negro fell on his knees, and clung to the other's skirts, crying:

"Oh, marse cappen! Sweet, good marse cappen, don't go fur to leave Cato dis night, when dat murderin' red nigger'll be coming roun', *shuah*, to look fur um head! Oh, marse cappen, wait fur de mornin'! You'll done go an' bruk you' neck, you will, *shuah*, an' I se gwine to be luff all alone, fur dem ghostesses to ketch. I se no coward, marse cappen, you know dat's well's I, but dem ghostesses dem skeers de life out of po' Cato, and you comes home an' fin' him dead some o' dese days, an' all de ghostesses runnin' off wid um heads under um arms, *shuah*. An' maybe um take Cato long wid dem. *Oh-h-h-h!*"

He ended with a prolonged shivering groan, completely overcome at the thought.

The Rock Rider addressed him with much more kindness than usual.

"Come with me, Cato," he said, "and I will show thee why I must go."

Cato followed willingly enough, keeping fast hold of his master's skirt, and the Rock Rider led the way down a side passage of the cave till the faint glimmer of starlight ahead of them warned them that they were approaching another exit.

They came out on the mountain-side, looking down a precipice into a small valley opposite to the South Park.

The whole valley was dotted with camp-fires, and groups of painted and plumed warriors moved about between them.

"The Apaches are there, Cato," said the Rock Rider, gravely. "They do not come all the way from Mexico for naught. The Comanches are coming by the other pass, and there are four white men in the valley. Have two tribes united thus for naught? Come with me."

Cato followed silently back through the cave, till they emerged in full view of the South Park.

At that very moment the brilliant stars of a

bursting rocket showed over a gap in the Sierra on the opposite side of the valley, and the Rock Rider started, with the exclamation:

"I have it at last. 'Tis a train from the northern forts, and the tribes have heard of its coming. Fool that I was not to think of it before! Now, indeed, I must away, Cato. In yonder train, perhaps, are women and children, and they *must* be saved. The mule, quick!"

Cato made no more objections now. Perhaps he thought himself safer where he was, than following his master.

In a few minutes more the gaunt mule was on its way down the mountain, and Cato took his seat at the mouth of the ravine, muttering:

"I isn't gwine to go in dar till mornin'. Marse cappen may be crazy, but dis nigger knows whar him best place is, an' he don't stir a peg, ef all de ghostesses runs away wid um heads all night."

CHAPTER VIII.

YAKOP.

WE must return to Carl Brinkerhoff, who left the tree of rendezvous on perhaps the most laudable errand of the three parties, in search of his faithful dog, Yakop.

The cautious and phlegmatic German was also the best suited of the three to the position in which he found himself, for he was a magnificent shot, with nerves like iron.

He walked quietly away toward a part of the valley where there was plenty of cover, and secured himself a way of retreat to the mountains before he did any thing else. Then he seated himself at the foot of a tree, drew from his pocket a small whistle, and sounded three short notes upon it.

That done, he leaned back against the trunk of the tree, and waited patiently.

He had not so very long to wait. Before ten minutes were up, there was an eager bustling through the grass; and Yakop, panting as from a long run, came up to his master and licked his hand.

Then the dog sat down and looked up in Carl's face, as if waiting to be interrogated. Brinkerhoff commenced the catechism with perfect gravity, and really seemed to understand Yakop as well as the dog did him.

"Yakop," he began, "haf you seen de Injuns, mein hund?"

"Wuff," answered Yakop.

"Vos dere many of dem 'round dere, Yakop? Nein. I knows you doesn't talk mosh, *mein hund*. You says 'yah' odor 'nein,' and das ist all. Say, vos dere *swanzig*, (twenty) Yakop?"

"Wuff," answered Yakop.

"Vos dere *dreissig*, (thirty) Yakop?"

Yakop shook his head and growled.

"Ah ha! Between *swansig* and *dreissig*. Das ist *genug*, Yakop. Now, *mein leiber hund*, s'pose you show me vere dey is. You knows de way, I s'pose; hey, Yakop?"

"Wuff," said Yakop, joyfully, and the two set forth together toward the Indian camp, where they arrived just about the same time that Gustave Belcour tried his ventriloquial tricks.

Brinkerhoff witnessed the arrival of Red Lightning from his scout, and noted the consternation caused by the mysterious voice in the branches of the tree. He sat by, laughing heartily and silently, as he saw the Indians firing up into the branches, and climbing up to search the tree; for, unlike them, he could see Belcour stealing off.

But he noticed that the Indians did not remain dupes of the tree trick long, for, after a short search, they came down and rushed for their horses, feeding in a hollow beyond. Carl lying down on the side of an adjacent knoll, saw them ride slowly away toward the east, as the first flush of dawn tipped the peaks of the Sierra.

Then the sweeping white mist began to rise, thicker and thicker, and every thing was shut out from his view.

But where the eye of man was at fault, the scent of the dog proved a guide. Preceded by Yakop, Brinkerhoff set out to grope his way back toward the lonely tree of rendezvous, rifle in hand, ready for action.

CHAPTER IX.

THE COUSINS.

AFTER the departure of Gustave Belcour and Carl Brinkerhoff from the tree of rendezvous, Somers and Buford remained for some time near each other, conversing in whispers, and watching intently. But the sleepy influences of the night, and the apparent absence of all danger, speedily overcame their endeavors to keep awake.

First one, then the other, began to nod, and finally both of them fell back on the grass, and snored peacefully, in blissful unconsciousness of danger.

As good luck would have it, no harm came to them in consequence. Their abode was perfectly sheltered, and the Indians had entered the valley in the dark, so that there was no present danger of discovery.

The first peep of dawn awoke both, and they instinctively started up, full of apprehension, only to find themselves engulfed in a white sea of mist. Not a sound was to be heard where they were, except the occasional snort of a horse under a tree.

"I say, Jack," quoth Buford, presently, "why shouldn't we set out as well as those two other fellows? I don't believe those Indians amount to much, after all said."

"I'm game," responded the Kentuckian (Somers was a "Blue Grass" man), "if you are. I was just thinking that it wouldn't do to let those two foreigners do all the work, and come home to blow about it. I'm good for twenty-four Indians, if they don't pop me over before I get through my loads. But what can you do, old fellow? You never were very famous for shooting."

"I don't believe in shooting on horseback," said Buford, gravely. "I've seen too many shots thrown away in that manner. Here's something worth all your pistols in a *melee*, if a man knows how to use it."

And the Virginian tapped his saber as he spoke. It was his pet weapon, and he was the only one in the party who carried one, simply because he was a first-class swordsman and rider.

Somers grinned. It was an old matter of argument between him and his cousin.

"You can keep your old saber," he said. "What'll you do with it if you get shot down at twenty yards?"

"I shall not get shot down at twenty yards, Jack," said the Virginian, quietly. "I've tried the experiment before this, and I've seen your fellows turn tail before ours in a charge, not because ours were braver, but because we had drawn sabers, and your pistols were empty."

"I can shoot a bullet into each telegraph pole in a line, at a full gallop," began Somers, a little boastfully, but Buford checked him.

"You may, perhaps, Jack," he said; "but Indians are poor shots at best. Come, don't let's blow our own trumpets. I believe in the pistol, inside of six feet, in a gallop, but only as a reserve. Come, will you mount?"

"Ay, by Jove!" said Jack, and they led out their horses, bridled them, and saw every thing into its place. Belcour's and Brinkerhoff's horses were left under the oak tree—an exceedingly careless proceeding, but exactly in keeping with the rashness of the whole party of young madcaps.

Both of the cousins were splendidly mounted on blooded horses, able to run a four-mile race on very good time, and it was this very fact that had emboldened them to so much rashness.

Jack Somers carried two revolvers in his belt, and two more in his boots, a favorite and convenient Southern plan of bearing weapons. Buford, on the contrary, had his pistols in the holsters of his saddle, and only bore on his person a long cavalry saber, which he had sharpened to a razor-like edge, and now carried in a leather scabbard.

They rode off into the mist just as the light began to gild the tips of the Sierra, which they could faintly see gleaming through the white clouds above them, with a rosy radiance inexplicably lovely. The trees were invisible until close by, when they loomed out with startling suddenness, like ghosts in the fog.

Jack Somers rode headlong into the middle of a pool before he saw it, and when he turned his horse to go out, a thick wall of mist swooped down, and before he knew where he was, he found himself separated from his companion, and all alone.

This was sufficiently puzzling, as there were no means of finding the true directions in such a fog. The imprudent Kentuckian, heedless of danger, began to call out:

"Frank! Frank! where in the deuce are you?"

"Here," cried the voice of his cousin, some way off. "Don't make such a noise; there are Indians about; shut up."

"Indians be hanged!" shouted the reckless youth; "I'm game for all the Indians in the—"

"Crack!" came a rifle out of the mist on the other side, and the dull red flash shone through the white cloud for an instant. The bullet flew far wide of the mark, having been only fired by guess-work; but the crack of Somers's revolver heralded a shot that was aimed straight for the place where the flash had been.

It was answered by nearly twenty red flashes from different points, and even by guess-work as it was, the balls whistled disagreeably close. Then, as if by magic, a gust of wind came down from the Sierra, the sun showed his fiery disk between the peaks, and the mist began to thin and rise up under the influence of his beams.

And then it was that Somers saw a long line of mounted figures, in open order, coming through the mist like ghosts, and heard a fierce yell as they perceived him.

The next moment they swept forward at full speed upon him, a line of painted savages, on horses spotted like leopards, scarlet plumes and blankets waving, weapons glittering in the sun,

and bright sabers in the hands of more than half of them.

He saw all this in an instant, and then he drove the spurs into his horse, and away he went across the front of their line, heading for the middle of the valley. As he turned, he caught sight of Frank Buford, also at full speed, but on the other side of the Indians, with a single chief on a horse spotted like a jaguar, in full pursuit.

Such a scampering over the valley as ensued Jack never forgot. The Indians, flogging their spirited little horses to full speed, sent shot after shot at the single fugitive, fired wildly, and doing little damage, but trying their best to cut Jack off from his refuge, and hem him in between them and the mountain.

But for the superior swiftness of his horse Somers would have been in an awkward scrape. As it was, he just managed to brush past the left hand warrior within ten feet, dropping him with a pistol bullet as he passed, his first shot.

After that he was comparatively safe, for the racing speed of his thoroughbred animal quickly distanced the small horses of the Comanches. Indeed they soon dropped the pursuit, and turned away after Frank Buford, whom Somers perceived at a little distance off, turning round to charge his solitary pursuer.

They were several hundred yards from the rest, in an open glade, shut in on every side by live-oak trees, with a little pool in front. Frank Buford, having reached the end of this glade, had turned back; and as Somers looked, he met the chief on the jaguar-spotted steed in full career. Both were armed with sabers, and they met fairly.

For a moment there was a clash and a glitter, and then the horses went circling round, while Red and White cut and hewed at each other. But the combat did not last long. Somers could see that Frank was only playing with the Indian, who knew nothing of the proper use of a weapon like the sword. The other Comanches were coming rapidly up, when Buford suddenly pressed his horse close to that of the Indian chief.

Red Lightning made an effort to cut him down, but the raising of his arm proved his ruin. As the chief's blade went up, Buford delivered a fierce point (in fencers' phrase) right at the Indian, and Red Lightning threw up his arms, and fell back off his horse. Then Somers saw no more, for, with a vengeful yell, the Comanches bore down on Buford, and the Kentuckian put spurs to his horse, and galloped down to aid his cousin against the fearful odds that surrounded him in the glade.

CHAPTER X.

A HARD CHASE.

WHEN Jack Somers galloped down to the aid of his friend, Frank Buford was hard beset. The glade in which he had been caught was a perfect blind alley, and his only exit was through the Indians.

As Jack charged down, his cousin dashed out, and for a few minutes there was a confused *melee*, pistol bullets flying about in all directions.

Somers was one of those cool hands who *never fired too soon*, the great secret of his success in pistol practice, and he made every one of the five shots left in his first revolver tell on a foe in as many seconds, when he got close enough.

The Indians, on the contrary, full of excitement, fired wild, and Frank Buford, his swift thoroughbred bounding here and there in their midst, his saber cutting, slashing, and guarding on every side, added to their confusion.

The whole scene transpired in less than a minute, and then the two cousins, both bleeding from slight wounds, had made their way out of the crowd, and were off at full speed up the valley, twisting and turning from side to side to derange the aim of their antagonists.

Three Indians lay dead on the ground by the pool, and four more were more or less wounded, some seriously.

Red Lightning had not been killed. They saw him rise from the ground and remount his spotted steed, but he could not follow them.

The remainder of the Comanches made but a faint pursuit, and our friends slackened their pace to a canter, while the Indians halted.

"We're well out of that, Jack," quoth Buford, gazing ruefully at his foaming horse. "A little more, and it would have been all day with us. Those fellows fight better than I thought they would."

"Ay, there's no skulk about them," said Somers, proceeding to reload his pistol.

He had only used six of his twenty-four shots so far.

As they looked back they perceived the Indians gathered about Red Lightning, and a single chief was galloping away toward the head of the valley, whence they had all come.

The cousins looked after him, and beheld a sight which made their hearts stand still.

The end of the valley was crowded with Indians, all coming down at an easy lope to meet their comrades!

"Frank," said Somers, gravely, "we've made great fools of ourselves. We shall have to do all that we know to escape from this. We

must ride for Denver City, and we're lucky if we get there."

"Our horses are fresh," said the Virginian, hopefully. "Those ponies can't come near them in a race. We're safe enough, I guess."

"They can run a smart streak," Somers admitted; "but what are we going to do about Brinkerhoff and Gustave? The red-skins will have them sure, if they haven't already."

"Every man for himself, and God for us all," said Buford. "We can't be expected to wait for them. They went off on their own hook, and we must do the same on ours. Come, let's ride faster."

The cousins swept off up the valley toward the north at a free gallop, but the body of Indians in the rear did not quicken their pace. It seemed as if either they had other game in hand or were secure of their prey, for they kept on at the same easy lope, and the two cousins rapidly left them behind.

Soon they were hidden from view by a curtain of live-oaks, and Buford beheld their own old camping-tree by the spring, a little to the right.

"Let's go there," he suggested, as they galloped on. "One of them or both may have got back."

They swept past the tree at full gallop, calling out the names of their friends, but no answer was returned.

There was not even the snort or whinny of a horse to greet them.

"Thank heaven! they must have got off safe," said Somers. "Now we can run with a clear conscience."

He had hardly said the words when he heard a joyful distant neigh, and Gustave Belcour's black horse, without saddle or bridle, could be seen trotting proudly round them in a distant circle, his head high in air, like a wild mustang.

"Brinkerhoff has got back, and turned him loose," said Buford. "Where the deuce can Gustave Belcour be?"

He was answered by the clear, sweet notes of a horn from the summit of the Sierra, that seemed to float over the valley, multiplied by the echoes into a concert of delicious melody.

Both instinctively turned round to the east.

There, on the summit of a lofty peak, they could see the airy form of the Spirit of the Sierra, looking down at them.

She waved her long spear, and pointed to the north with a warning gesture, and then waved it forbiddingly, as if to prohibit their further advance.

"By heavens, Jack, this is something very strange!" said Buford, halting. "She seems to say there are enemies ahead."

"We shall soon see, behind those trees," was all the answer the Kentuckian made, as he galloped on to a little island of timber that shut out the view from the pass to Denver.

Buford remained where he was, watching the mysterious girl. He saw her repeat the same warning gesture, as Jack disappeared in the timber ahead, and then she suddenly turned and vanished from the peak like a dream.

How she went he could not see, but a moment after he saw her reappear at the edge of a dark canyon, and spring down into its black recesses as fearlessly as a bird.

Then, on a sudden, the boom of a piece of artillery from behind the curtain of trees in front was followed by a distant crackle of musketry; and Jack Somers came galloping back out of the timber, heading *for the west*, and gesticulating wildly to him to follow.

Buford turned his horse and rejoined his cousin, from whom he received the panting explanation:

"There's a whole tribe of Indians blocking up the road to Denver, and a number of soldiers fighting them. Frank, we'll have to make for Utah. It's the nearest shelter I can see. The whole country seems to be up. Listen to that firing."

Indeed, the racket was becoming fearful as it was, the boom of the guns being incessant, the yells of the Indians louder than ever.

They were answered by the Comanches coming up the valley below, and the sounds served as a guide to the two cousins, who galloped as hard as ever they could tear toward the west, where a dense forest clothed the foot of the Sierra, and offered them the shelter they craved.

In a few minutes, so great was their speed, they were out of immediate danger, and from the edge of the woods perceived the Comanches bearing down toward the soldiers in the pass, heedless of the two fugitives in the wood.

"So that's what they're after," said Somers, as he looked. "No wonder they were so indifferent to us. I say, Frank, it looks like old times to see that smoke there. How would you like to be into it?"

"I'm just as well pleased where I am," said Buford, dryly. "This soldiering isn't what it's cracked up to be, Jack."

Just at that moment they heard a low *wuff!* at their horses' feet. Looking down, there was little Yacop frisking about, while the grave voice of Carl Brinkerhoff addressed them from a neighboring tree, behind which he had been hidden.

"I say, fellers, dem Injuns isn't such fools after all. Dem makes us hunt our holes pretty lively, I guess. You fellers don't got no chance mitout me und Yacop, so ve shticks togeder after dis."

Even as he spoke, a tremendous yelling burst forth from the scene of action, and a crowd of mounted Indians broke loose from the rest and came tearing toward them. In the midst of the crowd the black top of an ambulance could be seen rocking about as if the horses were coming at a furious pace.

With one accord the three friends turned and dashed into the timber, the yelling growing louder every moment, and the crackle of musketry fiercer than before.

CHAPTER XI.

THE WOLF'S MOUTH.

AT the mouth of one of the upper gorges of the Sierra sat the gaunt frame of the Rock Rider, on his tall mule, when the first echo of the guns boomed upon the morning air.

The Rock Rider turned his head, and his large dark eyes lighted up with the excitement of an old soldier at the sound of artillery.

"A-ha!" he cried, aloud, snuffing the air, "the savage hordes have attacked, as I thought they would, and the sound comes from the Wolf's Mouth. The heathen are coming from far and near, to fatten on the spoil of the white man, and where will this little handful of men be, against the swarms that I saw gathering?"

He sat still for several minutes, musing, when the third and fourth guns boomed out, accompanied by the faint, distant crackle of musketry.

"And those girls," he continued to himself; "must they, too, share the fate of so many others, bright, beautiful, and beloved as they are? Must they, too, be profaned by the accursed touch of the lustful Apache, and the Cheyenne fiend that knows no mercy for age or sex? Not while I can wield a sword, and cast a lance. I will do what I can to save them, and God, will help my shortcomings."

He turned his mule, as he spoke, out of the gorge, and rode along the edge of a cliff that overlooked the valley below—a mere ledge along the side of the mountain, not over three feet in breadth. It was one of those peculiar steps or terraces in which the Rocky Mountains abound, one of three grand stages, each separate from the other. The lower stage was that on which Gustave Belcour was still toiling along, bewildered by a number of cross-canons and impassable walls, that seemed to lead him further and further into the nest of mountains without any hope of ascending higher.

The second was the stage on which the Rock Rider had his home, a separate system of ledges and canyons, inaccessible from below, except at one or two points, which might be searched for unsuccessfully for weeks, and which was equally separated from the third or topmost range—the home of the mysterious Spirit of the Sierra. For this passage to the last range the Rock Rider had often searched, with the patient cunning of insanity, but so far without success. Many a time he had seen the white, graceful figure, himself unseen, and the fancy that she was the embodied spirit of the Sierra had sunk deep into his mind, cultivated and poetical naturally, and now intensified in its imaginings by the spirit of mania.

As he rode rapidly along the narrow ledge, his sure-footed mule stepping fearlessly, he ever and anon cast his eyes upward, expecting to see her. The poor man seemed to cling to her presence as his sole companionship in his loneliness, and hardly felt surprised when he heard the sweet tones of the mysterious horn echoing among the cliffs.

"Oh, bright Spirit!" exclaimed the Rock Rider, clasping his hands; "I know that thou must be kind, thou art so beautiful! Pity a poor lonely father searching for his lost child, and send her back to me, Spirit; give me my own darling little Evy once more!"

Boom! Boom! Hum-m-m—Bang!

The sullen echoes of the guns were the only answer to the prayer of the Rock Rider.

The tears rolled down his furrowed cheeks, but he urged on his mule faster, murmuring:

"'Tis just! A gentleman must die in harness if need be, doing his duty. I must do mine, and rescue these poor creatures from the devouring heathen. God may forgive me my sins at last, and restore my little one to me, pure as when she was taken."

He rode rapidly along the edge of the precipice in full view of the valley, the sounds of strife growing plainer as he advanced. Presently, turning an angle of the cliff, he came in sight of the exit of Wolf's Mouth Pass, so called from the rows of jagged pinnacles, just like the teeth of a wild beast, that garnished its opening jaws.

There was a great herd of horses, some mounted, others running loose, with crowds of Indians rushing about, while a sparkling of musketry flashed from the crowd along its edge, repeated from the Wolf's Mouth.

There he saw the steady blue lines of soldiers halted and keeping the savages at bay, while the artillerymen were laboring like madmen to

The Rock Rider.

bring their pieces to bear correctly, and the covers of several ambulances and wagons were visible crowded together in the rear.

Just at that moment a wild yell from the valley below struck on his ear and he looked quickly round, with an air of intense interest.

There, in the valley itself, and coming at full speed, was a vast cloud of fresh Indian horsemen, whom he recognized at once as Comanches.

The yell was answered from far up the pass, with a peculiar intonation, and the Rock Rider started.

"All the tribes of the West are gathered together," he muttered. "Apaches here too? Who has gathered them to this place?"

But he pressed on at a rapid trot over the perilous path, till he disappeared in a deep cleft, the other side of which led out on a rocky platform at the edge of the pass itself.

In a very few minutes he was there, the yells growing louder as he advanced, mingled with the loud, continuous crackle of musketry.

When he drew up and sprung off at the edge of the rock, the scene below caused him to utter a shout of admiration and delight.

All the old soldier blood in him boiled up, as he shouted down in tones of encouragement:

"Keep up your hearts, brave boys! No cavalry can break you, if you are steady!"

There, in the broadest part of the pass, the rear company, less than twenty men, had gathered into a compact mass, bristling with bayonets, and vomiting fire, while a surging crowd of wild horsemen swept round and round the little group, yelling and shooting, but not daring to charge home.

The smoke and dust filled all the pass, through which the red flashes, the sparkling bayonets, and the gleaming lance-points, flitted ghost-like.

But the Rock Rider could see that the little knot of infantry was slowly moving down the pass toward their comrades, halting to fire only when too closely pressed.

He looked down the pass and beheld the rest of the detachment, now drawn up into a hollow square surrounding the ambulances and guns, and then the man set to work to help his comrades.

Loose rocks and bowlders were plenty enough where he was, and with a great exertion of his herculean strength he sent one crashing down into the midst of the Apaches below, smashing men and horses alike in its terrible sweep.

Then he heard, high above him, another sound, piercing the air sweet and clear, above the confused din of the conflict.

It was the Spirit Horn of the mysterious genius of the mountain!

"Spirit, I thank thee!" cried the Rock Rider. "If thou art angry with the savages too, they shall flee."

He looked down and beheld the Indians halted, awe-stricken, and, as he looked, a great boulder thundered down from above, and crashed its way into the midst of the crowd below.

It came from the hands of the Spirit of the Sierra.

The Indians in the pass uttered a wild yell, and swept past the little group at full speed, going down the pass toward the rear of the soldiers engaged at its mouth.

"God of heaven, have mercy on them!" ejaculated the Rock Rider. "They are taken between two fires, and we have ruined them!"

Watching intently, he saw them go tearing down the pass, right into the rear of the guns and wagons, and in a moment the wildest scene of confusion ensued.

All order disappeared among the soldiers, the guns were abandoned, and the whole force huddled up into a dense confused mass.

He could see the wild riders spearing the plunging horses of the teams, and yet recoiling under the fire of the infantry.

Then a dark-covered ambulance with gleaming top dashed out of the press at full speed, the reins streaming behind the frantic horses, showing that the driver had gone from his seat.

Away into the dark masses of the Indians it plunged, a broad way opening as if by magic, the wily savages closing in behind. It flew past the huddled mass of soldiers out into the middle of the valley, the Indians howling behind it like demons, the horses wild with the fear of a stampede.

Then, when it was in the very midst of the South Park, a fresh mass of mounted Indians dashed across the track, and the flashes of firearms followed in quick succession, shooting the horses.

In a moment the ambulance came to a sudden stand, rocked, swayed, and finally fell over on its side, when the Indians swarmed over it like a cluster of ants.

"God help them, now, for the devils have them," groaned the Rock Rider.

Three white struggling figures were dragged forth from the ambulance, and one of them was immediately struck down. The other two were thrown on the backs of horses, and carried off at full speed. The flutter of robes told the tale only too plainly. The captives were women, and they were in the hands of the most merciless savages on the American continent.

With a deep groan the Rock Rider covered

his face. When he looked forth again, the Indians were retiring. The sullen defiant cluster of soldiers were slowly moving back to surround their guns and train once more, leaving their dead on the soil to the mercy of the enemy.

The Rock Rider looked up to the summit of the rocks.

The Spirit of the Sierra had disappeared from view.

Slowly he turned his mule and plunged into the dark gorge and quiet reigned over the valley once more—the quiet of death.

CHAPTER XII.

THE CROOKED TRAIL.

In the afternoon of the same day Gustave Belcour, wandering on among the mountains, found himself hopelessly lost.

Whichever way he turned, he saw nothing but a nest of peaks towering overhead in all directions, their sides furrowed with black ravines, and no perceptible way for him to get out.

All the morning he had heard the boom of artillery, now in one quarter, now in another, according as the echoes bore it to his ear.

He was seeking for a means of ascent to the higher passes of the Sierra, which thus far seemed to mock his efforts. Everywhere he was confronted by sheer precipices, and the passages between them seemed only to lead him into deeper labyrinths.

At last he came to a standstill, in a little hollow basin, shut in by rocks on every side, from which there appeared to be no exit.

He was very hungry and tired too.

He had come away without food and his exercise had been very severe. All the mountain sheep that he had seen had been far out of gunshot. Leaping fearlessly from rock to rock, they would stop a moment to gaze at the toiling man below, and then skip away as if despising him.

Belcour came to a halt, and sat down in the valley to consider.

As he sat down, weariness overcame him, for he had not slept all night, and the tired youth fell asleep, his gun under his head.

When he awoke, the valley was rapidly growing dark, the sun having sloped downward many degrees. He heard light footsteps near him, pattering over the rocks, and remained perfectly still to watch.

Presently the graceful form and great curving horns of a mountain sheep, or bighorn—called by the Indians *ahsata*—came into view not far from his feet. The animal was advancing timidly, as if lost in wonder at the novel sight of a human being lying there.

Belcour slowly turned his head, and the animal started back.

Remaining perfectly still, he saw it gradually recover its confidence, and come forward toward the pool, where it stooped its graceful head and drank, watching him narrowly all the time.

Visions of roast venison floated through the hunter's mind, as he saw the creature so close to him, but they were doomed to disappointment in this instance, for as he suddenly sprung to pick up his rifle, the *ahsata* gave a tremendous bound, and darted across the valley into a corner, where two walls of precipice seemed to meet.

Straight up this corner the creature bounded like a cat climbing a tree, and Belcour forbore to fire, for he was already too late.

But the intruder had done him a service better than food. He had showed him the way out of the glen.

Without waiting, for he knew it would soon be sunset, Gustave ran to the corner where the bighorn had ascended, and beheld a way indeed, but such a perilous one that he hesitated to try it.

"Never mind, Gustave; courage, my lad," he said to himself. "If you don't go out this way, you stand a chance of starving to death in the mountains. So here goes."

The way was a sort of natural staircase, whereof the steps were about five or six feet in height, with treads from six inches square to a foot, and a precipice on either side.

It was ticklish work going up such a place and the dark fast coming on: but desperation supplied skill to Belcour, and after ten minutes' hard work he stood at last on a level ledge of rock, with an overhanging precipice above him, and a steep ascent before him.

Up this natural path he went, muttering:

"Where a bighorn can go I can follow."

And follow he did, with great daring, the light increasing as he rose higher, for the sun was not yet set and the higher he went the more he saw of it.

By a lucky chance he seemed to have arrived in the second stage of the Sierra, where he could continue on the middle level for a long time, without meeting any obstacles.

The ledge led to a plateau of rock, over which a stream of water, a few inches deep, had spread itself out, after issuing from a dark canyon beyond, and fell into the valley over a precipice to his left.

Into this canyon Gustave plunged, for he could distinguish that it wound upward, and that was where he wanted to go,

He began to feel more hopeful now of solving the mystery of the Sierra, and was determined to take advantage of the little daylight that remained.

From where he was he could see the sun hanging over the tops of the peaks, on the opposite side of the South Park, and if he had gone to the edge of the platform might have seen into the valley itself.

But that was not what he wanted now. He was intent upon solving the mystery of the strange, beautiful girl, and up the narrow canyon he toiled, as hard as he could go.

He found a sort of natural path by the banks of the torrent, now on one side, now on the other, which carried him on, the sun shining up the dark gorge all the time, till the sound of a waterfall ahead of him warned him of fresh difficulties to be overcome.

The waterfall turned out to be some twenty feet in height; and a sloping ledge, on which some earth had lodged, and where a little grass had sprung up, pointed him the way of ascent.

The ledge was quite easy to pass by, and he was half-way up, when he suddenly noticed some deep marks in the earth. He examined them carefully, and beheld the unmistakable footprints of a mule. He remembered at once the gaunt figure he and the rest had seen the evening before, and came to the conclusion that it must be the same who had made these tracks.

Who it was remained to be found out, and the idea of a connection between the strange man and the Spirit of the Sierra for the first time occurred to him.

Musing on the presence of human beings in such unlooked-for places, he ascended the path, and stood by the waterfall, when the sun was suddenly darkened by a black shadow of strange and uncouth form that was projected from below.

Belcour looked down.

The sun was setting, and across the middle of his disk, stood out the black, grotesque figure of the Rock Rider, coming up the gorge toward him, at a swinging trot.

The young man drew back from the edge of the rock, and awaited the other's appearance with some curiosity, for he had never seen such a being before.

To be prepared against a possible enemy, he threw his rifle into the hollow of his left arm, ready to be pointed at a moment's notice, and quietly waited the other's approach.

In a few moments more the clatter of hoofs was audible on the ledge, and the Rock Rider made his appearance, coming up like a goblin in the crimson glow of sunset.

The instant that he saw Gustave he wheeled his mule round like a flash, the left side toward the Frenchman, and covered him with the long lance, saying, in deep, hollow tones:

"Down with your arms! I am the Rock Rider."

CHAPTER XIII.

THE FLAG OF TRUCE.

NIGHT brooded over the valley of the South Park, and all the dark greensward was alive with twinkling watch-fires, around which the warriors of three great tribes, the Comanches, the Apaches and the Cheyennes, were standing, sitting and lying.

At the mouth of the pass, clustered behind the white tilts of their wagons, the remnant of the soldiers were sullenly gathered, cheerless and fireless, without a drop of water in camp, save what remained in their canteens from the morning's filling, a scanty supply at best.

The Indians seemed to have settled down to a regular siege, every avenue of escape being closed up by their grim circle of fires, but no further attacks being made. The warriors had suffered too heavily for their rash charges to be disposed to repeat them as yet.

The soldiers, on the other hand, were sullen and dispirited. All their animals had been killed or stampeded, and they had no resource but to defend themselves behind the corral of wagons till help arrived, if ever help came.

In the midst of the corral a group of officers was gathered, talking over the prospect before them in low tones.

"We have plenty of ammunition, major," said one, in reply to a question from a gray headed officer who seemed to be the commander, "but the men to use it are not so plentiful. We have too many recruits, and half of them are down sick or wounded since this morning. That Cochise must have had spies out who knew all our weakness, or the devils would never have dared to attack such a force as we have."

"How many men can you report for duty, major?" asked the major, a little crossly. "Don't theorize about Cochise, but tell me how many men I can depend on to cut through their line?"

"Not more than seventy, sir, and half of them are green hands."

"Green or not, we must make the attempt at daybreak," said Major Morris, firmly. "If we had horses or water I would send to Denver for help. As it is, we must cut our way through and spike the guns, so that the Indians can't use them."

"Allow me to suggest a better method, major," said another officer. "We have proved

that the Indians dare not attack us while we stick together. Our fire is too heavy. Why not take the guns with us, and move down to one of those pools to-night? The men are choking with thirst and desperate. We have nothing left to lose, and everything to gain. The moral effect on the Indians must be incalculable, if we move boldly and surprise them. They think we are disheartened at the death of the ladies—”

“Hush, Taylor, hush! don’t mention *them*,” said the major, shuddering. “It’s a fearful disgrace to five companies of United States troops that we should have let those devils carry off the general’s wife and daughters, without being able to fire a shot to save them. It has near broken my heart, and I shall demand a court-martial and resign if I ever get out of this scrape alive.”

Crack! went a rifle from under the wheel of a wagon, the place where the sentries were posted, and all the officers were on the alert in a moment, while the men jumped up on all sides from where they lay dozing.

“Who fired that shot?” demanded the major, sternly, as everything still remained quiet outside.

The Indians did not appear to have noticed it.

“I fired, sir,” responded a voice from under the wagon. “There’s three Injuns a-comin’ this way a horseback, and I’ve stopped ‘em.”

“Don’t fire again till I tell you,” said the major. “I want to see them.”

He went down between the wagons, and peered out. The forms of three horsemen were distinctly visible, standing out black against the firelight; and the center one bore a square white flag on his lance.

“A flag of truce, by Heavens!” exclaimed the major. “We must not be the first to disgrace it, gentlemen. Let us hear what they have to say. Boys, keep your eyes skinned all round. This may be only an Indian trick after all. I am going to hear their message.”

Unfolding his white handkerchief, and displaying it for a counter-flag, the major advanced from the shelter of the wagons a few paces, when he halted and signaled the others to advance.

A number of Indians could be now seen standing by the fires, watching the advance of their envoys with apparent interest, and the fires, brightly blazing all round, made it a matter of difficulty for any one to cross the open ground without being seen.

At thirty paces distant one of the Indian envoys stuck his flag into the ground, dismounted, and advanced to meet the major.

He proved to be a magnificent chief, with scarlet plumes in his hair, dressed in the extreme of Indian dandyism, and heavily armed—no other than our friend, Red Lightning, with his left shoulder freshly bandaged from the wound of Buford’s sword.

He executed a smart military salute to the major, for Red Lightning was proud of his proficiency in white customs, and then observed: “How do, white chief?”

“Badly,” said the major, sternly. Being an old army officer, he knew all the prominent chiefs by sight, and recognized the other. “Very badly, Red Lightning. The Great Father has treated you and Cochise well. What are you doing here to-day, then, killing his children? I myself saw rifles and powder issued to you not six weeks ago, and now you use them on us. Where is Cochise, the Apache chief? He is with you here, too.”

“Cochise is here,” said a deep voice; and one of the Indians dismounted and came forward.

Like Red Lightning, though only of medium stature, his chest was enormous, and he seemed to be possessed of unbounded strength. The expression of his face was that of ferocious, brutal insolence, which he cared not to conceal; and his weapons were more numerous, if possible, than those of Red Lightning. Such was the infamous Apache chief, Cochise, noted for more than a hundred cold-blooded murders.

“What does the white chief want with Cochise?” he demanded, sneeringly. “Men seldom call him twice.”

“What do you mean, Cochise, by attacking us in this manner?” asked the officer, putting a bold face on matters to deceive the Indian. “Are you not ashamed to break your treaties? You will get no more rifles and blankets from the Great Father, when he hears of this.”

“Bah! Squaws talk. Men kill,” said Cochise, roughly. “Much powder, plenty of rifle in train. Cochise take ‘nuff for t’ree, seven year. Go on war-path. Den make peace with Great Father when tired and hungry. Good.”

The cool audacity of the savage took the other aback for a moment, but Red Lightning addressed the third Indian in the rear, saying:

“Keche-ah-que-kono, chief of the Cheyennes, come forward and tell the white chief what we want!”

The third Indian turned his horse loose and came forward, a gray-headed chief, of dignified mien, who spoke English pretty well. He saluted the major as politely as Red Lightning had done, and the officer observed:

“I little thought to see you here, too, Keche. You’ll be sorry for it.”

“Maybe so I not be sorry, major,” said Keche, quietly. “We got you here so that you never get out and we got two little white squaws, too, that belong to the general. What you say dat, major?”

“Gracious God, Keche! Are they yet alive?” demanded the major, excitedly. “We thought surely they were all scalped when you took them.”

“One was, major,” said Keche, coolly. “I got up in time to git two odders. We hab ‘um safe, and now we want to trade ‘um!”

“Thank God, Keche, you’re not as bad as the rest,” said the major, fervently. “What do you want for them, man? I’ll give you each a barrel of powder when you come to the fort, and fifty blankets—”

“No go,” interrupted Cochise, coarsely. “No go. White chief much mean; not worth a cuss.”

What little English Cochise understood, it will be perceived, had not been learned on Fifth avenue.

Major Morris colored deeply with vexation at the chief’s insolence, but he contained himself, as many another gallant officer has been forced to in a similar helpless position.

“Keche,” he said to the Cheyenne, “tell me then how much you want to restore General Davis’s daughters back to my care unharmed?”

Keche-ah-que-kono smiled in a benevolent manner. His face bore a strong resemblance to that of the great Henry Ward Beecher in his saintliest mood, as the Cheyenne chief softly observed:

“White Father very rich. Got plenty guns, plenty powder, plenty wagons. *White chief give up all his guns and wagons.* Then Injuns give back the two white girls.”

“What! Give up the very train I was ordered to escort to Fort Steedman!” said the major, excitedly. “Keche, you must think I’m a coward to make such a proposal to me. Give up my train indeed!”

“Dat not all,” said Keche, quietly. “You got to leave train anyhow. We have him safe to-morrow. We want *all the guns your men have got, big gun, little gun and powder.* You pile your arms. We give up squaws, and take you back where come from.”

“In fact,” said the major, angrily, “you ask an unconditional surrender of all my force. Well, sir, you won’t get it. I could not face my general again if I ever did such a thing. You can go back, sir. If I tell my men your proposition they’ll fire on you now.”

“Maybe so they not fire,” said the Cheyenne, coolly. “You get shot yourself first, major. We go back. You t’ink better of him to-morrow morning. *We bring little squaws down to see you.* If so you say give up all, we send you back. If not, *you see what happens to ‘um before your eyes.*”

Without another word the Cheyenne chief turned on his heel and stalked to his horse. Cochise laughed brutally, and observed:

“Little white squaw nice. Warriors like ‘um. Ugh!”

Then he too stalked away, and Red Lightning said, very earnestly:

“You do what Keche say, major. We like white chief, but *must* have big guns to fight soldiers. Good-night.”

He saluted very politely, and turned away. Major Morris returned to his men in dire perplexity.

The Indian had put him in a fearful dilemma between the duty of a soldier and the feelings of a gentleman, for he had not known to that moment that the two girls under his escort were alive.

On his return, he at once called his officers together, and stated to them the Indian proposition and its fearful alternative.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE USE OF A CUR.

On the same night three men on foot, leading their horses, were slowly emerging from the woods on the west side of the South Park, and ascending the dry bed of a mountain torrent that led up the steep slopes of the Sierra.

They trod cautiously, and seemed to be aware that they were in danger, for not a quarter of a mile off the fires of some outlying Indians were plainly visible.

In front of them ran the little dog Yakop, and the party therefore is easily recognized as our three friends, Somers, Buford and Brinkerhoff. Yakop seemed to be acting as a guide, for the intelligent little creature frequently ran back, as if asking them to follow him, and always received a kind word from his master.

Before they had gone far up the ravine, the rocks shut out the view of the fires, and then the German spoke to the dog:

“Vat for you go disser vay, Yakop? Is de Injuns all gone?”

“Wuff!” answered Yakop, as plainly as if he said, “Yes.”

“But vat shall ve do mit ourselves up hier, Yakop? Dere is nopoly vat life hier, hein?”

Again Yakop gave a short “wuff.”

“Vat you say to das hund, poy?” asked Carl, admiringly. “He say somepoty life hier, und

ein freund, too. You see Yakop he be right before ve gets troo.”

“But bow can we be certain that we don’t get caught in the mountains?” asked Somers, anxiously. “Your dog’s a wonderful dog, Carl, but he can’t know the way out, when he’s never been here before.”

“I don’t got no fears ‘bout Yakop,” said Carl, confidently. “Yakop he got more sense dan all of us put togeder. You see, mein herr. He tell me, plain as hund can shpeak, dat dere is *vite man* up dieser berg. I goes dere. You stay. pehint, de Injuns catches you.”

“We had better follow the dog, Jack,” said Buford, gravely. “Remember that his scent enables him to distinguish between people. He has probably struck the trail of some white hunter. You kncw there are some in the mountains, and the dog may be right. We can’t be much worse off than in that valley, full of Indians as it is, with every pass occupied. I vote to follow the dog.”

Here Yakop, who had been listening to the conversation as if he understood every word, leaped up on the speaker, wagging his tail; and then went off up the pass, gamboling and frisking, frequently looking back to see if he was followed.

The three friends took up their line of march after the dog in silence, and after awhile mounted their horses for greater convenience. The ravine became narrower and steeper, till it climbed a species of stage in the mountain side, when it ran on, nearly level, for some distance, ending in three diverging canyons, each as black as ink. Into the right hand one of these Yakop ran without hesitation, and the horsemen followed.

The floor of the canyon was smooth, and covered with sand and gravel, which shone white through the darkness and made the task of following so much the easier.

At last, however, their progress was suddenly cut short by a perpendicular wall of rock, which seemed to forbid further advance; and Somers fretfully exclaimed:

“I knew how it would be, following that dog. What are we to do now?”

Carl Brinkerhoff dismounted and looked round.

Yakop had disappeared.

The German called him in a low voice several times, and soon they heard the eager panting of the little creature, coming back to them.

“Vat for you fool us dieser way, Yakop?” asked Carl, sternly. “How ve go to get out of dis, hein, you ole fool?”

Yakop gave another “wuff,” wagged his tail, and started forward into a deep black cavern in the rock, which they had hitherto not seen in the darkness of the canyon.

Before entering, the German struck a match, and lighted a tiny dark-lantern, which he took from his saddle.

No sooner had he turned its light on the white sand than he said, in a low, eager voice:

“Fellers, ve don’t got so much sense as Yakop now. Dere be a mule’s hoofs as plain as der sun, mit shoes on too. Now vat you dinks?”

The other two were down in a moment, and beheld the track plainly; but the impressions of the mule’s shoes were pointed *outward*, and Somers observed, coolly:

“I always said that dog was a fool. Here the brute’s been taking a back scent, and didn’t know any better. This only proves that some one on a mule has come out of here into the valley. We ought to have gone the other way.”

“Vell, den, if you likes to go pack, you may,” said Brinkerhoff, dryly; “but I doesn’t like dem Injuns so mosch as ali dat. Vere dieser feller came from dere ist no Injuns, und I goes *dieser way*. You follers if you likes.”

So saying the Teuton advanced into the cavern, throwing his light ahead, where Yakop appeared trotting forward with his nose down.

After a moment’s hesitation the two comrades followed, leading their horses down a long and narrow winding cave, which at times seemed to be open to the sky and a mere cleft, at other times widened out into a large cave, shut in above them.

All the while the mule-track appeared at intervals in patches of sand, till at last the stars shone in front of them, and they emerged on the bare mountain side, having passed right through a gap in the Sierra.

A narrow ledge, forming a sort of irregular staircase up the Sierra, seemed to be the only way ahead.

It was practicable for men on foot, and Yakop seemed to find no difficulty in passing, but the horses, led as they were, took a long time before they mustered courage to follow.

In places the ledge became a ridge not two feet wide, with a sheer precipice on either hand, overlooking a black gulf.

So they toiled along in the darkness for nearly an hour, over the same path which the Rock Rider had traversed on a trot on his sure-footed mule twelve hours before; and at last the dark gorge opened its jaws before them, at the extreme end of which the glimmering red light of a fire was reflected faintly from the portals of the Cavern of Death.

It was midnight when they reached the grotto.

and the sight of the red fire puzzled them all, for everything round was deathly still.

Yakop went trotting quietly up toward the cavern, and the three friends slowly followed, keeping a cautious look-out ahead of them, with rifles poised and cocked.

Nothing occurred to disturb them till they were near the entrance of the outer cavern, when Yakop suddenly stopped, snarling, and at the same moment a dark figure leaped up from the side of the ravine, yelling out:

"Golly sakes alive! Wurra dat! Git out of dis, you mean t'iefs!"

Without the slightest warning Somers was prostrated to the earth, as if struck by a cannon-ball, by the brawny fist of Cato, which knocked him senseless before he could utter a sound.

Then came the flas'n'a rime, as Buford, in the sudden start, let off his gun accidentally; and before Carl Brinkerhoff could collect his senses, he received a blow on the back of the head that sent him headlong to the earth, while Buford was pinioned as if in the grasp of a vise, and Cato's knee struck him in the back like the blow of a trip-hammer. All the breath was knocked out of his body as he came flat down on his back on the hard rock.

Like an angry lion the herculean black leaped upon Carl Brinkerhoff, who had staggered up, confused, and before the German could point his rifle Cato had clasped him in his arms, and was bearing him down.

Then Carl roused all his strength, which was also tremendous; and white and black rolled over and over on the ground, tugging and straining at each other in grim bulldog silence, while Yakop danced about outside, snarling, watching his opportunity to snap at Cato's heels.

CHAPTER XV.

THE CONJUROR'S PLAY.

How long the struggle between Brinkerhoff and Cato might have lasted, and which would have finally conquered, is uncertain, for both were men of herculean strength and nearly equally matched, while Somers and Buford had been effectually put out of the fight by the sudden attack of the negro, and were incapable of helping their friend.

In the very height of the struggle, when both were panting for breath, the sharp ring of hoofs at a trot came up the glen, and the deep voice of the Rock Rider shouted:

"What ails you all here? What's the matter, Cato?"

In a moment the black wrenched himself away from Carl's grasp; the latter being nowise loth to release him, and draw a pistol.

Then the German covered the figure of the Rock Rider with his weapon, and vociferated:

"You keeps back now, or I shoots you! Tousand teufels! Vat sort of beeples is dis, dot lifes hier? I dinks dey must pe crazy!"

"Brinkerhoff, is it thou?" cried the familiar voice of Belcour. "How in Heaven's name came you here?"

And the light form of the youth sprung down from the croup of the gaunt mule, where he had been sitting behind the Rock Rider.

"Oh! marse cappen, is dat you?" bellowed Cato. "I'se so glad you come. I'se been fightin' in mid free ghostesses, and I isn't no coward, marse cappen. Glory be to God!"

"Vas in der teufel's name ist all dieser?" demanded Carl, in amazement. "How you commen hier, und vas ist das man on der mule?"

"I'll tell thee in good time," said Belcour, hastily; "but where are Somers and Buford, and what were you all fighting about?"

"Mein Gott, how should I know?" said Brinkerhoff, ruefully. "Wir commen up hier, all on the tiptoe, und das nigger he shump out, und he bit me ein crack on der kopf, und send me flying. Den he knock down Somers und Buford in a minute, und wir begin to fight, und das ist all, till you two fellers comes."

Becour began to laugh.

"Well, well! do you know that you have been fighting with the servant of our best friend? But by Heaven, he seems to have killed Buford and Somers."

"Not quite, but very near it," said the faint voice of Buford, as he sat up. "You've got strange friends, I must say, Belcour. That nigger's as strong as a bull, and I believe he's broken my back."

"Oh, marse cappen," said the voice of Cato. "I'se done gone an' done it, sah. Golly, how 'em f'lers dropped! Yah! Yah!"

"Peace!" said the deep voice of the Rock Rider, who now spoke for the first time. "You did right to guard the cave, but you struck too quick. These gentlemen are my friends."

"Oh, de Lord, marse cappen, how's I to know dat?" said Cato. "Hyar we lib all de time, and nebber see a soul. How I know dat dem's you frien's, come snoopin' 'round hyar, dis time o' night? Why dey no call out, to let ole Cato know dem's comin'? Gemmen, I'se very sorry ef I'se hurt ye, seein' ye's ole marse cappen's frien's, but what a po' nigger to do when he can't see ye, and dem murderin' Injuns all round, jess as thick's flies on a dead mule? But I'se mortal sorry, I'se shuah. Hyar, marse,

I'll pick up the little gemmen what I knock down, and I'll bring him in."

And the kind-hearted negro picked up the insensible Somers in his arms, and bore him into the cavern, while the three comrades, so strangely met, followed behind, listening to the courteous words of the Rock Rider.

"Gentlemen, I regret exceedingly the unfortunate mistake of my awkward servant, which I beg you to excuse. Cato is a faithful fellow, but I have found it very difficult to teach him manners, and he had the excuse of not knowing who you were. I hope your friend will not be found materially injured. I will see to his cure myself. And now, gentlemen, allow me to welcome you to the poor habitation that time and ruin have left to a gentleman who once had the honor to draw a sword in the service of his country. Your friend, Monsieur Belcour, met me accidentally in the Sierra to day, and I rejoice at the opportunity of seeing you. And now, gentlemen, enter my castle and be welcome."

And the gaunt figure stalked in before them to where Cato was already putting on fresh wood to a fire in the outer cave.

The portal of the Cavern of Death was black and silent, and no traces were visible of its ghastly occupants.

Buford and Brinkerhoff gazed with surprise upon the gaunt figure of Rock Rider, as he stood thoughtfully by the fire, leaning on his lance, with the pinched white female face on the round shield staring at them from its sightless eyes.

Belcour had become used to him during their ride, but the other two were full of amazement. Everything in the cavern, from the Rock Rider to Black Cato, was weird and uncouth.

Somers, under the care of Cato, slowly recovered his senses, and stared round him in a confused manner, not knowing where he was.

Then the Rock Rider, suddenly turning round, said:

"Gentlemen, we are five resolute, well-armed men, and in the valley are two delicate girls, tenderly nurtured, who were taken prisoners today by the most merciless men on earth to women. I have suffered from those men myself in former years, but I could forgive them all, if they would only spare those women. Gentlemen, what say you? Who will follow the Rock Rider to rescue two Christian ladies from the power of the heathen?"

"I will go, monsieur," said Gustave, simply.

"We will all go, if need be."

"How you know dot de leedle kirls haf been taken by de Injuns?" asked Carl Brinkerhoff, cautiously. Carl was not an enthusiast.

"I saw them captured myself, sir, from the summit of the Sierra," said the Rock Rider. And he told them of the attack, the runaway ambulance, the slain woman, and the captive girls, in short, nervous words.

"Den dot's vot ve see diesser morgen," said Carl, reflectively; "ven ve ron so like der teufel. It vas de Injuns catchin' de leedle kirls. Vell, fellers, I goes mit you. I likes de leedle kirls, und I keels all de Injuns in de falley, so I gets dem pack to deir faders und mothers."

"It is settled," said the Rock Rider, solemnly. "To-morrow morning we will go forth, and wo betide the tribes of the valley if they refuse to give up the maidens. Who will get out alive is a different matter."

"Stav!" said Belcour, suddenly. "I have an idea. If we all go, we are too many for craft, too few for strength. I, monsieur, am a conjuror, and you seem to be a person of influence among the Indians. I propose that we go together, and try to obtain these girls by artifice. We have not far to carry them, only to the camp of their friends, who have beaten off the Indians, but lost their horses. Well then, let one of us, the best mounted, ride through the passes and go to Denver for help. No doubt monsieur here will show us the way to do that. They will send troops and horses, we shall beat off the Indians, save the ladies, and all be happy. What do you say to that, my friends?"

"The plan is good," was the universal response.

Whether it was feasible, the next day would decide.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE APACHE CAMP.

The morning dawned, brilliant and glowing, over the summit of the Sierra, and again the white curtain of mist covered the surface of the valley below.

The principal chiefs of the Indian tribes were gathered in the Apache camp in front of Cochise's bivouac, talking together in low tones.

They seemed to be discussing some appearance that perplexed and awed them, for even the bold, brutal face of Cochise was clouded with a look of apprehension.

Red Lightning was speaking to the rest.

"The tribes of plain and mountain know me, and they know whether the heart of Red Lightning is the heart of a warrior. Wounded and alone, only yesterday, I rode closer to the bayonets than any chief of you all, and shot down three of the enemy's soldiers. But when Red Lightning was a boy, he heard the tales of

the spirits that dwell in Sierra, and his father told him that he had seen them once. What is a chief, to strive against the Manitou; and who shall deny that the Spirits of the Sierra are angry with us? Were not five of our warriors crushed by them in the Wolf's Mouth only yesterday? Hole-in-the-day says that he saw two, a white spirit and a black one, rolling down rocks on our warriors. You know yourselves what we saw last night."

"I saw a figure crowned with flames leap from rock to rock ov'r our heads," said Cochise, in a low tone. "It thundered out words in an unknown tongue from a trumpet. May be the Manitou is angry, and wishes to preserve the pale-faces. We had better go."

"You are fools and weak," said Keche-ah-que kono, the Cheyenne. "I have been among the white men to see the Great Father, and have seen many wonderful things, but they told me they were all tricks. I have seen a mule cut in half, and one man ride off on each half, and this fiery figure is nothing to that. Let us persevere, and the train is ours."

Keche had, indeed, on one occasion visited the Eastern cities with a delegation of chiefs, and had seen the marvels of a pantomime. Since that time he flattered himself that nothing could astonish him.

But Cochise and Red Lightning were both skeptics as to his wonderful stories, while abundantly superstitious as to what took place under their own eyes.

"We have heard the wild goose scream and the coyote howl," said Cochise, contentiously; "but never such tales as Keche tells about what he has seen. What trick can it be that clothes a man in fire, and causes him to leap over black canyons like the wild ashata? We know there are spirits, or they could not have taught the white man to make his fire-weapons. We believe our eyes. They tell us that the spirits are angry."

"And is the great Cochise afraid?" asked Keche, sneeringly. "When we have trapped a whole train of the white men, and have a chance to give guns and powder to all our tribes, will Cochise fly before the tricks of a cunning pale-face? Then let the Apaches go if they list. The Cheyennes will reap the reward alone."

"Cochise fears nothing," said the Apache, angrily. "He will not fly to-day. We will try, as we agreed to last night, to make the white soldiers give up their train, but another night finds us out of the valley. Cochise fears not the daylight, but the night is the kingdom of the bad spirits of fire, who dwell in the Sierra. We can not stand another night like the last."

"Then the Cheyennes will stay," said Keche, firmly. "The Comanches and Apaches may go if they will."

"The Comanches will stay," said Red Lightning. "Let all of the spirits of mountain and plain unite to help the pale-faces, they shall not escape from us. The train is ours. Let us take the girls down now, and see what the soldiers say. They may give up without fighting, to save their women. These white fools will do anything to please a squaw."

"And if they will not," said Keche, "what then?"

"Then so much the worse for them," said Cochise, savagely. "We will torture the girls to death before their faces. They will change out, for these whites are all fools, and then we shall have them."

As he spoke, the sweet, solemn notes of a horn rung out from one of the peaks in the Sierra, and all three of the chiefs started and looked at each other.

The valley was still deeply shrouded in white mist, through which the red gleam of fires shone ghostlike and faint.

Above them the yellow glory of the morning sun seemed to fill all the air, for the mist was still too thick to distinguish the distant peaks of the Sierra, and the sunlight came in a broad flood, lighting up the fog. And out of the misty glory overhead came the sweet, clear lugle notes, echoed from gorge to gorge around and across the valley in a hundred reverberations, till it seemed impossible to tell from which side it came.

"There it is again," whispered Cochise, turning pale. "It is the same horn that we heard yesterday, when the rock came down and crushed five warriors. Who shall doubt there are spirits now?"

Red Lightning looked fearfully up, and even the Cheyenne chief was a little uneasy, in spite of his bravado.

To explain the terror of the Indians it must be known that the night before strange noises had been heard in the Sierra, and a fiery figure had been seen among the precipices at several points.

The superstitions of the warriors, never very hard to rouse, had been worked upon to a great extent, and the whole encampment was exceedingly uneasy.

And now the sound of the same mysterious horn, in broad daylight, brought a crowd of warriors out, looking up into the air to see whence it came.

Slowly the mist thinned above them, as the

glow of sunlight became stronger, and still the magic horn was heard at intervals.

When at last the peaks of Sierra became plain, not a soul was to be seen anywhere.

And, as the mist lifted, the sound of the horn ceased.

Then there was a sudden stir through the camp, and cries of surprise, for a single white man on horseback, a broad powerful man, with a huge tawny beard, was seen in the very midst of their camp, riding toward the chief's bivouac. Running by the horse's side was a small dog, and both had halted in front of Cochise before any opposition was made.

CHAPTER XVII.

YAKOP'S BEHAVIOR.

The stranger, who was no other than Carl Brinkerhoff, seemed to be quite at his ease in his dangerous position, although he was entirely unarmed.

He drew up before Red Lightning, saluted him politely, and said:

"Gut morgen."

The Comanche chief answered, in broken English:

"How do, brudder?"

Cochise scanned the other from head to foot, and observed:

"What do here? Ugh!"

"Ich bin commen to see Cochise," said Carl, cool'y. "You bin him, hein?"

"Me Cochise," replied the Apache, proudly. "Great chief of the Apaches. All white men hide when see Cochise."

"But you don't got men genug to take away de rifles from de soldiers, hein?" said Carl. "You comes mit me, and I shows you how to catch dem, shoost so easy as tumble off a log."

"Who are you?" demanded Keche-ah-que-kono, the best English scholar of the party, very suspiciously.

"I bes a deserter from der army," said Carl, quietly. "I haf ein quarrel mit Major Morris, de vite chief over dere, und I commen hier to show you how to take dem, guns and all, venger you likes."

The chiefs looked from one to the other.

Carl's dress was obviously military to a certain extent, as much so as that of most deserters. He rode a stout Government horse, in a McClellan saddle; but then he had no weapons, a suspicious circumstance.

"Where are your guns and pistols?" asked the Cheyenne chief. "Deserters have guns."

"Ich bin der cook," said Brinkerhoff, calmly.

"We haf no guns, not'ings but dieser messer."

And he pulled a huge cook's knife, a yard long, out of the knee of his boot.

"I cooks for de men und de officers; und I haf nice time till dem wants for to put mir on guard; den I kicks against him, und I takes mein horse, und I kallops avay like der teufel, till I kets into your camp."

"And when did you come away?" asked Keche.

"Yesterday, ven de fight pekin," said the German. "I don't got no lofe to fight, shentlemen, und I rons ven de first fire begins. Bote I likes de two leedle kirls vot vas in der camp mit de soldiers, und I vants to get dem for meinself. So you bromise mir I habt dem, I shows you how you kets into der camp mit de soldiers, shoost so easy as not'ings."

"White man big fool," said Cochise, gruffly. "Squaws no good. What for want squaws? How can get into camp?"

"You gifes me de leedle kirls, und I shows you," said Carl.

"How know squaws here?" demanded Cochise.

"Yakop he tells me," said Carl, phlegmatically.

"Who is Yakop?" asked the chief.

"Mein leedle tog," answered Carl. "Yakop commen zie hier, mein hund, und make a pow to der chief, like a leedle shentleman."

Yakop immediately rose up on his hind legs, walked forward, and made a very polite bow to the chief.

Cochise, who had never seen such a thing before, was wonderfully pleased at the sagacity of the animal, and involuntarily held out his hand.

"How do, brudder?" he said.

To his great delight Yakop extended his paw, and answered with a short "wuff."

Cochise laughed uproariously, and the other chiefs were greatly amused and delighted. It has often been remarked in Indian delegations that the comical tricks of pantomime please them much more than the most magnificent display of scenery, and learned animals take them captive at once.

So it was with Cochise and the other chiefs.

Lately suspicious as they were of the German, Yakop's performances seemed to break the ice at once, and remove all distrust.

"White man must stay with us and keep dog," said Keche, who had never seen such a thing, even in his often-boasted Eastern tour. "White man shall be chief, and dog be made medicine-dog. Make him do more."

Accordingly Carl dismounted, nothing loth, and proceeded to put Yakop through a variety of tricks of various kinds, in the midst of a

great circle of admiring Indians. The news of the white man and "the dog who was a great medicine," spread with lightning speed through all three camps, till the ring was closely packed all round with thousands of heads, and Carl and Yakop were the observed of all observers.

Then the German remarked to Cochise:

"You ask me how I know leedle kirls in dieser camp. Yakop he tell me. Now you leds him go, und he vinds vere dey be, und gifis dem message, votefer you blease."

Cochise was half-incredulous, but delighted at the opportunity of seeing another trick. So he said:

"Tell little white squaws Cochise want dem."

"All recht answerd the German.

Then he called Yakop, and made a long speech to him in German, to which the dog listened attentively. He told him to hunt about till he found two white girls, and give them a letter, and Yakop answered "wuff."

"Say, mister chief," said Carl, in conclusion, "Yakop is a gut tog, bote de leedle kirls don't got no sense to understand him. S'pose I writes leedle letter to dems, to tell dems you vants dems. Den he carry it to dems."

"Good," said Cochise, unsuspiciously; and Carl pulled out his pocket-book and wrote as follows on a blank leaf:

"Come with the bearer where he will lead you. Friends are near you, and we will try to rescue you. But show no surprise whatever you see."

"A FRIEND."

"Dere, mein hund, you takes dat, und you brings back de leedle kirls," said Brinkerhoff, addressing the dog. "Now, mister chief, you waits leedle time, und you see dat Yakop do shoost as I say."

Yakop took the letter and trotted off in a circle, snuffing the ground.

Presently he struck off in a straight line for the Comanche camp, the crowd opening before him, and Cochise exclaimed:

"Good dog. White man great medicine. Dog go straight to squaws."

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE CAPTIVE GIRLS.

In the midst of the Comanche camp, reclining under a tree and twining their arms around each other, were two young girls, pale and miserable-looking, but very pretty. One was a brunette, the other a blonde, and yet no one would have hesitated to call them anything but sisters.

They were the two unfortunate young ladies who had been taken captive the day before, owing to the sudden stampede of the two ambulance horses. In the same vehicle with them had been their mother, the wife of General Davis, (commander at Denver,) and a single driver.

The latter had been shot dead before the horses started, and Mrs. Davis had been cut down and scalped before the eyes of the shrieking girls, who had expected nothing else but to share the same fate. The Cheyenne chief, Keche-ah-que-kono, had galloped up just in time to save them from death or worse, and had carried them off, since which time they had been left comparatively alone under the tree, the Indians keeping at some distance from them.

The girls were listening to the frequent yells of delight that greeted Yakop's performances, and drearily wondering what it was all about.

"Oh! Blanche," said Clara Davis, the dark sister, shuddering; "whatever will become of us! Hark to those fearful monsters! Perhaps they are preparing for another attack on our friends. Is it not terrible to be left here, in sight of the very wagons that shelter our soldiers, and know that we are as helpless as if we lay in prison?"

"Let us trust in God, Clara," said Blanche, trying to put on an air of hopefulness. "He can not mean to kill us, or we should not have been left alive so long. Help may come yet. It is impossible that so many soldiers as were in our escort can be conquered by these wretches of Indians. You know how contemptuously the officers always spoke of them."

"But they could not drive them off, Blanche," said Clara. "See, the wagons remain just as they ran them into the corral; and you know how many horses were killed before ours ran away."

"I know it, Clara; but the Indians must have been beaten off, otherwise the wagons would have been burned before this; and they seem to be afraid to attack the soldiers again. There is no more firing."

Just at that moment they heard a great yelling, and the crowd of Indians parted in front of them. Out of the crowd came running a stout little cur dog, ugly and common-looking, who came galloping straight toward them, followed by his yelling admirers.

"Look, Clara, look!" said Blanche eagerly. "There comes a dog, and no Indian's dog neither. He's coming here. What can it mean?"

Yakop bounded up, wagging his thick, stumpy tail, and laid a little white note in the girl's lap.

Then he gave three or four short barks, expressive of satisfaction, and sat gravely down.

in front of them, looking as important as a judge, awaiting the reading of the note.

The Indians in the rear had halted to watch the proceedings at a respectful distance, and a great chattering ensued among them.

Blanche opened the letter, and read it through twice. Then she handed it to her sister, and pressed her hand on her heart to still its excited pulsations.

"Did I not say God would protect us, Clara?" she whispered. "Some one is coming to our help. I knew they would."

"Who can it be?" murmured Clara, as she looked at the angular German hand in which the letter was written. "He tells us to follow the bearer, and to show no surprise whatever we see. What can it mean?"

They were interrupted by a short "wuff" from Yakop, who had risen, and was looking back as if inviting them to follow him.

"What a queer dog!" said Clara, innocently. "Are we ready to follow him?"

"Wuff," said Yakop, emphatically; and he went off two steps and looked back.

"He really seems to understand," said Blanche. "This is a strange thing. A dog brings us a letter telling us to follow him, and he seems to understand all about it, too."

Again Yakop barked impatiently, and the girls rose to their feet.

Immediately Yakop began frisking and gamboling to express his delight, and set off at a slow trot toward the Indians.

"Oh! Blanche. Are you not afraid to go?" said Clara, apprehensively, as she noted the hideous war-paint of the braves.

"As much as you," answered sensible Blanche. "But it must be done. That letter must have come from a friend, and we ought to follow his advice. There is some mystery hidden here, and what it is we shall soon know. See! they are opening a way for us."

The circle of braves parted as she spoke; and the two sisters, hand in hand, walked slowly toward the bivouac of Cochise, through a lane of Indian warriors, with their eyes cast down to the earth in mortal terror, but restraining the expression of their fears as well as they could.

CHAPTER XIX.

ECLAIR.

WHILE these events were transpiring in the Indian camp, four men were overlooking it from a lofty pass of the Sierra, three of them mounted and one afoot. The pedestrian was Gustave Belcour; and the Rock Rider was speaking to Somers and Buford.

"Beyond you, gentlemen," he said, "the passes are no doubt free of Indians in any force. I have watched them coming for more than a week, and they are only numerous in the lower passes. Any you meet on your way to Denver you can dispose of. They will only be a few roving vagabonds. Once through those mountains to the north, and you will come to the Middle Park. God speed you thence. 'Tis a straight road to Denver, and they have parts of several regiments there. We will do our best to keep the Indians in the valley till you bring help. Spare the spur to-day. You will want it at night. Farewell."

He dismissed them with a wave of his hand, like a king sending away his subjects. Gaunt and meager as he was, roughly and scantily dressed, there was yet that in the carriage and air of the mad Rock Rider that told of the habit of command.

Instinctively the two cousins bowed low, as they had so often done on receiving orders from some general, and both rode away down the pass toward the north, at a rapid pace.

Then the Rock Rider turned to Gustave.

"Now, monsieur," he said, in perfectly pure French, "let us proceed on our errand to save what lives we can. You have no horse. What shall we do about that?"

"I must go on foot, I suppose," said Belcour, mournfully; "but I regret it much, for my horse is such a creature as few men ever owned, and I have taught him all the tricks of the circus. He will come to me like a dog, but no one else can catch him, and woe betide the man that tries to lasso him. If he is only loose and hears my voice, he will come to me."

"Look down into the valley," said the Rock Rider, "and tell me if you see your horse."

Belcour advanced to the edge of the pass, whence he could see the whole of the valley, and looked down.

The South Park was full of Indians and grazing horses, but it was not possible at that distance to distinguish the individuals.

"What color is your horse?" asked the Rock Rider.

"Black," answered the Frenchman. "I do not see him."

"Yonder he is," said the Rock Rider, quietly. "He feeds by himself, and the Indians do not see him."

He pointed to a part of the valley at the foot of the Sierra, where a belt of wood separated a little strip of green from the rest of the Park.

A black horse was to be seen there, all alone, feeding quietly.

"Mount behind me," said the Rock Rider.

The Rock Rider.

"I will take you there. He feeds at the entrance of my own secret passage."

The young Frenchman obeyed the injunction, and the tall mule set off at a trot along the edge of a precipice, through paths apparently impracticable for man or beast, with a confidence that told of long practice, diving into the recesses of black canyons, and finally bringing up in the singular cave or cleft by which the dog had led the three friends the night before.

Emerging into a broad, easy ravine, the Rock Rider pointed to the green meadow below, and observed:

"There is your horse. Call him."

Belcour uttered a cry of delight. It was indeed his lost animal, which the piercing eye of the Rock Rider had detected, when its own master could not recognize it.

Belcour leaped from the mule's back and ran down the pass. He was about to call to the animal, when he heard a loud yell at the other side of the meadow, and two Indian warriors came galloping in. They had obviously caught sight of the horse, whose general contour and beauty of form marked him for a different creature from their own ponies, and thought that they had a prize.

Belcour stopped and crouched behind a rock, laughing.

"Now, *mon beau cheval*," he muttered, "we shall see the fun. Let us see what thou wilt do to those eager gentlemen, Eclair."

As if to answer the inquiry, Eclair threw up his head with a shrill neigh, and came trotting loftily toward the Indians, till within some fifty yards, when he wheeled about and galloped round them in a circle.

Both warriors in desperate haste, went racing at him, swinging their lassoes round their heads, and soon intercepted the horse.

First one lasso flew, and hovered over Eclair's head. With a knowing shake the horse tucked his head clear before the noose fell, and trotted away, neighing as if in derision.

The second lasso flew, and descended over his head and neck, while the Indian uttered a shout of triumph. He was too fast.

No sooner did the black horse feel the noose on his neck, than he wheeled short round, and came at the Indian like a tiger, squealing viciously.

In a moment mustang and rider rolled on the grass, while the furious stallion seized the warrior in his teeth, shook him as a terrier would a rat, and then came down on him with both forefeet, striking like a prize-fighter.

The loosened nose fell off as he shook his head, and Eclair turned and dashed at the other warrior, who was gathering up the coils of his lasso for another cast.

The amazed man fitted an arrow hurriedly to his bow as the furious stallion flew at him. He was too late.

Before he could draw it to the head, Eclair was upon him, rearing up and striking with those terrible forefeet, and down went the warrior, in an instant, crushed to death.

Then Belcour ran swiftly down the pass into the meadow, followed by the Rock Rider, and called out:

"*Ici, Eclair, ici.*"

In a moment the lately savage stallion turned about, whinnying loudly for joy, and came tearing up to his master at full gallop, whinnying all the way, when he ran his nose into Belcour's hand, and rubbed up against him with evident pleasure.

"*Chut, Eclair, silence, mon garçon,*" said the Frenchman. "The Indians will hear thee, and we don't want that yet till we are ready. Well, monsieur le Rock Rider, what think you of my horse?"

"Tis a noble animal," said the Rock Rider, admiringly. "What can he do?"

"Everything but speak," said Belcour. "But you shall see soon. He shall be my passport into the Indian camp, as Brinkerhoff has taken his dog. Will you come, monsieur?"

He spoke to Eclair. The noble creature knelt down, and allowed his master to mount him without requiring any exertion beyond throwing his leg over. Then he rose up without saddle or bridle, guided solely by the clasp of the legs of his rider, as gentle as a lamb. Belcour was proud of his horse, and with good reason, for the animal did his teacher credit, and the Rock Rider remarked:

"Sir, you are one of the few men in these degenerate days that practice the noble art of horsemanship, as it was in the days of the knights of old. I honor you for it, sir. In a few moments more our perils will begin. Let us quits ourselves like men, and trust to the God of battles."

Even as he spoke they turned the angle of the wood, and came in full sight of the Indians, who were scattered about all over the valley, on horseback and afoot.

"Trot out," said the deep voice of the Rock Rider; and into the midst of the camp they rode, to where a dense crowd proclaimed to them that Yakop and Carl were the objects of curiosity.

As the strange-looking pair rode onward, a loud yell was caught up from mouth to mouth, and the Indians ran to arms all over the valley.

CHAPTER XX.

THE WHITE MAGICIAN.

WHEN the Rock Rider and Belcour had arrived in the midst of the camp, matters looked decidedly menacing. Several hundred Indians were galloping toward them from all sides, and the indications seemed to be that they would both be shot down without any opportunity for an explanation.

Still they trotted solemnly on, looking neither to the right nor left, straight toward the bivouac of the three principal chiefs; and their imposing attitude had its effect. As the Indians came near them, they gradually slackened their pace and fell into a sort of procession on either side and in rear, while the shouting and yelling gradually ceased, and gave way to the mutterings of surprise.

Indeed, many things had combined within the twenty-four hours to rouse the superstitions of the Indians.

Some of the chiefs recognized the gaunt figure of the Rock Rider, who had foiled them so mysteriously two nights before. As he sat upright in his saddle, with the stiff military seat he affected, the ghastly-white face on his shield struck terror into the souls of many there.

There was something so weird and unnatural in his appearance, that all shrank back from him in ill-defined awe.

The young Frenchman, in his brilliant costume, riding without saddle or bridle, was also somewhat of a puzzle to them, and as the two seemed to be secured from escape as they were, the Indians left them alone.

So they proceeded in silence until they neared the fire of Cochise, where all the principal chiefs were by this time gathered. They beheld Carl Brinkerhoff quietly installed near the chiefs, placidly smoking his long meerschaum, and just as they approached, the two captive girls were seen coming toward the fire, following the lead of little Yakop.

The new arrivals for a moment seemed to distract the attention of the Indians, for the chiefs all looked up.

The Rock Rider halted and grounded the butt of his spear, when he remained staring stonily at the Cheyenne chief, without a word.

Keche-ah-que-kono seemed to be uneasy under the gaze, for he shifted his seat and averted his eyes, which yet, a moment after, as if by fascination, returned to meet the stony gaze of the Rock Rider.

Belcour, on his part, dismounted and advanced to the chiefs, when he turned round and spoke to his horse in French:

"Up, Eclair, up! and show them what you can do."

Immediately the perfectly trained animal stood upon its hind-legs, and walked gravely forward to its master, holding out its fore-foot as easily as a dog would perform the same feat.

"Down then, Eclair, and guard the circle," proceeded the conjuror, making a signal to the horse.

Instantly the black stallion came down and began to trot around the circle of chiefs, lashing out with his hind-feet whenever an incautious Indian came too close, and preserving the sanctity of the circle as perfectly as a chain of sentries could have done.

And all this while not a word had been uttered by one of the chiefs.

Belcour now turned to them, and addressed them in English.

"Hail, chiefs! I am the king of the medicine-men, and I can catch all the bullets you fire at me, and throw them back. I can call the spirits from the mountains, and do all wonderful things, and I come in the name of the Great Spirit to demand that you give up the two pale-face maidens that you captured, and return to your own homes and bury the hatchet."

The chiefs listened in perfect silence to this effusion. The two girls, confused and astonished, stood hesitating whether to come forward or not. Yakop sat gravely down by the side of his master, and Carl Brinkerhoff smoked as placidly as if not a soul were near.

Cochise was the first to speak, and his bloodshot eyes rolled fiercely.

"White man fool and liar. Not come from Spirit. All three join together. All liars. Kill all."

He looked from one to the other, and it was plain that he suspected collusion between the three.

Belcour made no answer. He stood still, facing the chief, as if about to speak, when Cochise gave a violent start.

The sound of the magic horn could be plainly heard, echoing from rock to rock of the Sierra, and Cochise trembled.

"The spirits sound their horns to tell of my coming," said Belcour, solemnly. "If you think I am mortal, fire at my breast, and you will see."

He opened his coat as he spoke, and stepped back a pace, but Cochise was not to be convinced.

"White man liar. Me show him," he said, and drew forth a revolver from the numerous bandoles at his girdle, aiming straight at Belcour's heart.

Crack, crack, crack, crack, pealed out four shots, and still the Frenchman stood erect, although his face paled somewhat, and he seemed to be in great pain, for every bullet struck fair.

When Cochise lowered his pistol, in great surprise, the conjuror deliberately cast back the four bullets, each one striking the Indian's bare bust sharply, and Belcour smiled.

At the same instant a hollow, demoniacal laugh echoed close to Cochise's ear, and as the Apache chief turned his head sharply to see whence it came, a voice growled:

"The grave of Cochise's is being dug, for he has tried to harm my servant."

In unconcealed agitation Cochise rose to his feet, and Red Lightning followed suit. The Cheyenne chief was more obstinate. He curled his lip and observed:

"White man's tricks. Me seen much better."

"Keche-ah-que-kono," said the deep voice of the Rock Rider, in the Cheyenne tongue, "dost thou remember the day, many summers ago, when thy band took the life of a woman from the fort, when the soldiers were away? I know thee for the man that slew the mother and stole the child. Where is the child with the golden hair, Keche-ah-que-kono? Where hast thou hidden her?"

As the deep tones rolled through the circle, again the Cheyenne looked uneasy. He evidently recognized the other, for he answered, tremblingly:

"I can not tell, white chief. Keche was not there. It was a party of young braves hunting for scalps. I never saw the child."

"Liar!" thundered the Rock Rider. "Look on this face, and deny it if you dare!"

And he held up the round shield as he spoke, with the pale, ghastly face glaring down on the Cheyenne.

Something in that face seemed to awe and terrify the chief, for he rose to his feet, trembling, and stuttered in English:

"White lady very good to Keche. He never—she know—"

"She knows it indeed," said the deep voice again. "When Keche's child was sick to death, and his lodge was empty of food, who succored the chief and saved the child's life, but the white lady of the fort? When the captain of the soldiers went on the chase, who promised to guard the white lady from harm? Keche-ah-que-kono. When the cap'tain came back from the hunt, what met his eye? His lodge was in ashes, his child gone, and the white lady lay dead on the ground. And where was the Cheyenne who had grown rich on the bounty of the whites, and become a chief through the Great Father's presents? Gone, with the scalp of the white lady at his girdle, with the child of the man who had befriended his race, and who has now come to punish him. Keche-ah-que-kono, mount thy horse, for I have found thee at last, and thou and I must fight."

The rest of the Indians stood listening in wonder to the dialogue, carried on in their own language as it was; and all seemed to be surprised at the humble demeanor of the usually boastful Keche.

When the Cheyenne chief bowed his head to the request of the Rock Rider, the other chiefs would have spoken out, but for their attention being claimed again by the same mysterious voice crying:

"Let the men fight. The Manitou decrees it."

Then Belcour advanced, and in his turn addressed Keche.

"Chief of the Cheyennes," he said, "I can tell thee whether thou wilt be slain or no in this fight. The Manitou has spoken, and said that the winner in this fight is to have the white girls delivered to him, and this will tell us who will win."

He drew forth a pistol as he spoke, and pointed it at the white face on the shield of the Rock Rider.

"Behold," said he, "the divining pistol of the white magician. I fire a shot for my comrade."

He fired, and no change was visible in the face.

"Now one for the Cheyenne chief," said the conjuror, solemnly.

He fired; and a round patch of blood appeared on the white forehead.

"Take thy horse, chief," said the deep voice of the Rock Rider. "Tis thine own blood thou seest, to mark the forehead of her whom thou slewest."

Without another word he backed his gaunt mule into the crowd, which gave way before him, and Keche-ah-que-kono mounted his mustang.

Neither of the other chiefs offered the least opposition, for their superstition was thoroughly aroused by the magic tricks of Belcour, and moreover there is a natural liking in the hearts of all men to see a fair fight for their amusement. A huge ring was formed in an incredibly short space of time, about a hundred feet across, in the midst of which the Rock Rider sat statue-like on his mule, with his lance up. Keche-ah-que-kono, bristling with pistols as he was, and carrying a saber and rifle, yet stood steadily

The Rock Rider.

downcast, as he mounted his horse and rode into the arena.

His conscience seemed to trouble him for the past—a proof that his crime must have been more than ordinarily atrocious, for an Indian's conscience is very elastic.

All the while that this scene had been going forward, the two girls had been standing by, looking wonderingly on, and Carl Brinkerhoff had been smoking as placidly as if they were all perfect strangers.

Now, however, as the two champions rode out, Carl rose up, stretched himself with a yawn, and quietly approached his horse, which stood by. The German slowly swung himself into the saddle, as if to get a better view of the expected combat, and sidled up closer to the girls.

"Ket reaty, kirls," he dropped out from his lips, in a careless tone. "Der time ist com-men."

A soft voice, that came from the air to all appearance, spoke to them at the same time in French, saying:

"Suivez le cheval noir, mesdemoiselles. Soyez pretes a fuir."

And the girls knew it said:

"Follow the black horse. Be ready to fly."

Clara trembled and turned pale, but Blanche blushed scarlet. She caught the eyes of the strong, grave-looking German fixed on her own.

At that moment the black horse, obeying a whistle from his master, ceased to keep the circle guarded, and came trotting up to the young man.

And Keche ah-que-kono entered the arena of combat.

CHAPTER XXI.

THE TRIAL BY BATTLE.

VERY soon the whole concourse of Indians was gathered into the great circle, in the midst of which the Rock Rider and his opponent were confronting each other. In one place alone the circle was thin, where the two girls, the German and the conjuror were near each other.

The Indians had retired from their vicinity in consequence of the fierce antics of the black horse, which assaulted with tooth and hoof everybody who came too near.

And thus Belcour found himself standing near the two girls, sheltered by the body of the horse, and able to indulge in a little conversation, unseen by Cochise. The latter was indeed too busy looking at the opening contest to see much else.

Belcour's lips were apparently closed, but for all that the girls could hear a voice close to their heads, speaking.

"Young ladies," it said, "be ready to separate. One of you will be carried off by my friend, one by myself. We will try to gain the soldiers' camp, but we may have to go to the mountains. Be brave, and all will be well. If you are willing to fly with us, bow your heads."

Both girls looked bewildered, but for all that they bowed slightly, and Blanche murmured:

"Anywhere, away from these wretches!"

"It is well," said the mysterious voice. "Be ready."

And then every one forgot them in the interest of the combat.

The Cheyenne chief, splendidly armed, and mounted on a fiery horse, seemed to have an easy victory in his hands, and yet he looked troubled.

The Rock Rider, on the opposite side of the circle, had not moved. He sat like the statue of a knight errant, with his shield in front and the point of his lance up.

Keche ah-que-kono slowly walked his horse forward, and then halted. He drew his saber and slung it to his wrist, pulled out a pair of revolvers, and then yelled out his fierce war-cry, and darted down at the gaunt mule, full speed.

As he started, the tall mule, before so gaunt and still, suddenly became a marvel of quickness.

Bounding forward like a goat, and then leaping from side to side so as to distract the aim of the Indian, the Rock Rider and his singular charger came to the battle.

Shot after shot flashed harmlessly, for the Cheyenne was firing from a galloping horse at a target that perpetually shifted, and his aim was flurried and too quick.

In five seconds one pistol was empty, and the other half-gone, and then the two combatants met.

The lance of the Rock Rider would have pinned the other but for the dexterity of the Cheyenne, who threw himself half off his animal to one side, and fired three more shots at a few feet distance. Every one struck the shield fairly, and not one pierced it.

Keche had no time to draw another pistol, as his mustang sprung out of danger with him. He only caught up his saber, and wheeled round on the Rock Rider.

It became a fair duel between saber and lance.

The Rock Rider maintained the same erect seat, the same severe gravity of appearance as ever, seeming to be quite indifferent to the issue of the contest. His mule was as active as a cat, wheeling round like a top, and bringing the In-

dian always on his left side, the strong one for the lance.

Keche ah-que-kono whipped his mustang around, endeavoring to close with the other on the right, but wherever he went the sharp lance was presented to deter him.

At last, by a great effort, he reached the right side of the Rock Rider, and closed in with a fierce yell.

The Rock Rider laughed scornfully, and wheeled his mule to meet him. The well-trained animal reared up in the air, and his master at the same moment swung the point of his lance aloft. He held it all this time couched under his right arm, pressed close to his body, but now he swung the point aloft, and brought it down with a sounding blow on the shoulder of the Cheyenne chief.

Keche tried to guard that blow, but the long, heavy lance-staff came with too much impetus to be denied. It beat down the saber, and the lance-head cut a deep gash in the chief's shoulder, casting him out of the saddle to the earth in a moment.

Down came mule and lance together, as the Rock Rider set the point against the breast of his fallen foe, and thundered out:

"Spcak, Cheyenne, ere I slay thee! Plead for mercy for my child's sake! Where hast thou hidden her? Tell me, and I give thee thy life. Refuse, and thy heart's blood stains my lance."

The mule kept shifting its feet nervously, so that the lance-point quivered and shook around the Cheyenne, ready at a moment to be plunged in, at the first forward step.

Keche ah-que-kono was half-stunned by the fall, and moreover seemed to be overcome with superstitious terror.

"I do not know, captain," he faltered out. "The Great Spirit knows the truth. The girl fled from us, and escaped to the mountains."

"Liar!" said the Rock Rider, sternly. "Tell me where she is, or—"

He pricked him with the lance as he spoke, and the Indian, desperate at his position, grasped eagerly at one of his pistols.

In an instant the mule bounded forward, and the Cheyenne was pinned, writhing, to the ground by the sharp lance.

"Another liar gone, curses upon him!" said the Rock Rider, savagely, his lip writhing fearfully and covered with foam. "Ye will not tell me where ye have hidden her? Then your blood on your own heads!"

He seemed to be moved out of his usual calm into the white heat of fury all at once, by the denial of the Indian, and looked the maniac all over from that instant.

Leaning down from the saddle, with amazing strength he picked up the body of the Cheyenne, threw it across his saddle-bow, and deliberately hacked off the head with his long knife.

Then the spell seemed to be broken which had held the surrounding crowd of Indians. They had watched the combat in perfectly breathless silence, and had uttered a kind of groan as they saw their well-armed warrior go down before the lance of the stranger.

But the decapitation of the body seemed to rouse them. With one accord the whole circle sprung up, and rushed forward to take vengeance for the insult.

The Rock Rider seemed hardly to notice them, so perfect was his disdain, but as they came rushing in, firing and yelling, he suddenly dropped the body, spouting blood as it was, and catching the head by the scalp-lock waved it aloft in triumph, shouting:

"Death to the Cheyenne, Apache and Comanche! The Rock Rider defies ye all!"

In another moment he had wheeled his mule, and went shooting through the crowd like a meteor, with the terrible lance far ahead of him.

Not an Indian had yet mounted. It seemed impossible that a single man could escape from two thousand Indians, even on foot, surrounding him closely.

But into the crowd he darted, his lance hugged under his right arm, with his bridle hand brought up close to support it.

Into a dense mass of yelling and shooting warriors he drove, with the keen lance-point always directed at their faces; and whenever he struck it was always in the face or forehead, the blade splitting the skull and glancing off, without being engaged.

The mule aided its master, biting and kicking furiously, and clearing a passage wherever it went, so that a broad lane quickly opened, along which the Rock Rider sped toward the mountains.

And then, amidst the turmoil of yells and random shots, rose a cry of warning and rage from the rear, and the crowd swayed to and fro.

The Rock Rider shouted defiantly, waved his lance, and darted out of the crowd unharmed and unpursued.

As he looked back the Indians were running after their horses, and he could see two mounted figures fleeing toward the soldiers' camp!

Belcour and the German, while equally inferior, remembered that their part was the next to be performed, and kept cool. Gradually and imperceptibly they edged out of the circle, the intelligent, trained stallion aiding them as if he understood their wishes.

When the Rock Rider unhorsed the Cheyenne chief, Belcour threw his voice close to the girl's ears with a great effort, and said:

"The time has come. Separate!"

The Indians were all hushed and eager, watching the duel, and their attention was completely distracted for a moment.

In that moment Carl Brinkerhoff gathered his horse with rein and spur, so that the animal pawed the ground nervously, ready to start, and sidled up close to little Clara Davis.

At a silent signal from his master, Eclair came up and stationed himself opposite to Blanche Davis, and Belcour walked up to him.

At that moment the Rock Rider lifted up the Cheyenne's body and began to hack the head off, and with a universal yell, the Indians rushed at him.

"Now!" cried the Frenchman, eagerly, and he seized Blanche round the waist with superhuman strength in the excitement of the moment, and swung her up to Eclair's back.

Brinkerhoff stooped down from his saddle, and picked up little Clara as if she had been a doll, setting her on the saddle in front of him.

Then Belcour leaped up behind the girl, gave a great shout, and away went both horses at a thundering gallop from the crowd of Indians.

Little Yakop scudded off, stretched out straight in desperate hurry, and the whole party was a hundred feet away before the Indians had fully comprehended the trick played them.

Then, indeed, the racket was tremendous.

A rattling volley saluted them, as every savage, whether in the crowd or outside, snatched his rifle and let fly at a venture.

The whole valley was full of scattered, outlying parties, and every man, after firing a single hasty shot, ran for his horse, and galloped to intercept them from the American camp.

Their very numbers were in the way of quick success, for, several men being wounded by random shots of their own friends, the Indians became afraid to fire.

But, all the same, it soon became evident that the fugitives could not reach the camp without being intercepted, for Comanches and Apaches were tearing across their path by hundreds.

First Carl Brinkerhoff swerved off, and galloped down the valley to the only opening he saw, and then Belcour was compelled to turn.

As they turned, a tremendous volley burst from the soldiers' camp, and told with fearful effect on the dense crowd of Indians who scattered like sheep in an instant, but only to dash at Belcour with vengeful yells.

The young man shouted to Eclair, and made for an opening in the Sierra, the only chance he could see.

Even to get there he would have to run the gauntlet of several stray Indians, who galloped to intercept him.

But the warm eastern blood of Eclair was up, and the pace at which he went was tremendous. It was as much as Delcour could do to maintain his seat, and keep his fair companion from falling.

They shot through the air so fast that breathing became difficult, and both could hardly see. There was a sort of whizzing vision of fierce painted faces, and spiteful flashes through the white smoke and whistling bullets, and then Blanche Davis hid her face on her preserver's breast, clinging closely to him, as they scraped through a scattered group of Indians, every man of whom shrank from the shock of the black racer.

Open green plains, studded with trees appeared before them, and through the clear space they skimmed, with the speed of tirds, and still Eclair did not seem to labor, though carrying double weight.

The yells of their pursuers sounded fainter and fainter, for the thoroughbred stallion was running as he never ran at a race before, and the little ponies of the Indians seemed to be disheartened.

Before them rose the Sierra, and a great broad ravine, ascending at an easy slope spread before them at last.

Belcour spoke to his horse, and slackened his pace to a hand-gallop, as he looked at the ravine.

"Now, mademoiselle, we shall soon be comparatively safe," he said to Blanche. "We can escape our pursuers in these mountains, but fear you will have to undergo much hardship yet, before you can rejoin your friends."

Blanche looked shuddering back. The Indians were still following at some distance, but at a slow, easy lope. They seemed to have given up all hopes of being able to outrun the fugitives by speed.

Carl and Clara Davis were nowhere to be seen.

"Oh, sir!" said Blanche, earnestly, "I would suffer any hardship to be delivered from those terrible wretches; any thing rather than be captured."

CHAPTER XXII.

A RIDE FOR LIBERTY.

WHILE the wild duel went on, the girls had watched it with intense interest,

"You shall not be captured, mademoiselle," said Gustave, earnestly. "Sooner than give you up alive, I will blow out your brains with my own hands, if all other chances are gone. But things are not so hopeless. Two of my comrades have gone to Denver for help even now, and no doubt will bring back enough troops to rescue the train ere long. If we can manage to live in the mountains for a few days, we shall be saved. The Indians have nothing to eat, and cannot maintain such a crowd as they have by hunting more than a few days. Therefore, courage, my friend, and trust in Heaven."

He spoke much more cheerfully than he felt, for all alone as they were, with the whole valley full of enemies, and not a morsel to eat, save what he could find in the mountains, the prospect was gloomy at best.

But Blanche seemed to be comforted, for she smiled hopefully, and began to thank Belcour as they entered the ravine.

"But oh, sir," she added, "while we are safe, what has become of poor Clara and your friend? Do you think they have escaped? Was his horse a good one?"

"Very good, mademoiselle," he answered. "It was only a Government horse, it is true, but one of the best: a stout animal who could run well, and he must have distanced the Indian ponies ere this."

They were slowly climbing the ravine at a walk as he said this, and he turned round to look at the valley. It was full of scattered Indians galloping in three streams on the track of the three fugitives, and the heads of the two opposite streams were close to the Sierra on the other side of the valley.

But the Rock Rider and Carl were nowhere to be seen.

The inference therefore was that they had escaped.

Belcour looked down at his own pursuers, and they were already within gunshot again, for they seemed to be determined to keep up the pursuit till fatigue should do what superior speed could not.

Several flashes were followed by the whiz of bullets close to them, and Belcour jumped off his horse.

"The ravine turns a little above us, mademoiselle," he said. "Halt there, out of danger, and I will defend this pass."

As he spoke, he unslung his rifle from his back, and faced toward his pursuers.

CHAPTER XXIII.

A SHOOTING EXPERIMENT.

WHEN Belcour turned round, it was with the deliberate purpose of shooting his very best. All the nervous excitement which usually disturbed his aim seemed to have vanished in the crisis. He knew well that life and death lay in his steadiness now.

Eclair walked off up the pass, carrying the girl, till a jutting rock hid them from view in the valley, and then the intelligent creature halted, and waited for his master, as quietly as if he understood the necessity. Meantime Belcour called to mind all the instructions he had received from Brinkerhoff on the subject of shooting, and knelt down on one knee to steady his aim, resting his left elbow on his knee.

At the sight of the presented rifle, the Indians halted instantaneously, and every man dodged behind his horse.

Belcour took a steady, careful aim, but it seemed to him that the fore sight of his rifle had never trembled so much before. He knew that if he fired now, every shot must tell or be wasted.

With a coolness that did him credit, he deliberately sat down on the ground with his knees up in front, rested his elbow on the left knee, and took a fresh sight. To his great joy there was a perceptible increase of steadiness. The muzzle sight of the rifle ceased to tremble, and he felt that he could depend on his aim. It was a good lesson that he was learning in a grim school.

In the midst of the Indians was a particu'larly handsome spotted mustang, which he thought must be the mount of a chief, and he took a steady aim at the animal, for a lump sticking out of its side told him that an Indian was hanging there.

Crack! went the rifle, and Belcour watched for the effect of his shot with eager anxiety.

He uttered an exclamation of exultation as the spotted mustang reared up with a squeal, wheeled round and ran away, while the dark figure of its rider fell to the earth in full view, and lay there motionless.

"I have done it at last," he muttered. "Now I know how to shoot."

But the sound of his shot had roused the Indians. With one accord they uttered a loud yell, and sprung up on their horses to make a dash up the pass. The young man hastily crammed a fresh cartridge into the breech of his rifle, and leveled it once more.

Every Indian halted as if struck by lightning, and ducked down.

One of them fired a hasty shot, and the bullet struck the rock by Belcour's side. It was answered by the snap of the young man's rifle,

and the Indian threw up his arms and fell from his horse.

"Again!" said Belcour, delighted. "I must be growing a famous shot."

He crammed in another cartridge, as the Indians made a fresh rush, and again they halted as he leveled his piece.

Then Belcour rose up, confident and smiling.

"I have mastered the secret," he muttered. "One must keep cool and attend to the sight. That is the whole science of shooting."

Slowly he retreated up the pass, halting every now and then to present his rifle and threaten the Indians, who began to follow him again at a respectful distance.

Once or twice one of them fired a shot, but their aim being taken from horseback, was hurried and uncertain compared to his own, and he was unhurt.

Very soon he reached the jutting rock, behind which Eclair was stationed, and felt safe.

As soon as he had disappeared, however, the Indians, seeming to think him gone, came rushing up the pass. Belcour leaned his rifle on the rock, and shot down the foremost without difficulty, through the heart.

In a moment the Indians were down again and halted, while Belcour could see them, himself unseen all but the head. A second shot from his cover killed a horse, and caused a quick retreat of the Indians to a safer distance, when a spiteful rain of bullets came skipping over the rocks all round his head.

He kept remarkably cool, considering his general impetuosity, and replied at intervals, sheltering himself behind the outer edge of the jutting rocks, where his head was all that was visible.

After a few such shots he began to think over some way of escape, for it evidently would not do to stay there till night. He tried a ruse, therefore, leaving his hat to represent him, while he picked up a small rounded rock.

When he put up this rock and pulled the hat down, he was gratified to hear the patter of a dozen bullets all round, convincing him that the Indians supposed the stone to be his head. Softly he withdrew himself out of sight, and turned round. Eclair was standing close by and Blanche Davis had not spoken a word all the time.

"Now, mademoiselle," said Gustave briskly, "it is time we were off, I think."

He turned away up the ravine, followed by Eclair, who sidled up to him to allow him to mount. Then the gallant charger trotted away, as sure-footed as a mule, up the steep pass, and in a few minutes had turned an angle of the rocks, and was entering one of the numerous dark canyons that intersected the mountains.

Down this Belcour galloped at full speed, wheeling into a cross ravine at the end, that ran up for some distance, when it emerged on a broad ledge of rock, and the fugitives found themselves once more in full view of the valley.

Down, several hundred feet below them, they could see the mouth of the pass up which they had first come, and the Indians were still gathered below, evidently the victims of the ruse Belcour had played them.

The rest of the valley was all in commotion; and as they looked, a violent attack was commencing on the train, corralled in the midst of the valley. But Brinkerhoff and the Rock Rider were still invisible.

As the two fugitives galloped out in full sight on the ledge, they were saluted by a vengeful yell and a shower of bullets from below. But Eclair was not going at speed, and the lead whistled harmlessly by. In a few minutes more they wheeled round into a fresh canyon, and heard the yells of the Indians coming up the first pass in full pursuit.

CHAPTER XXIV.

A COOL HAND.

WHEN Carl Brinkerhoff turned off from the direct route to the camp, he kept a steady gallop toward the same woods in which he and his companions had sought safety the day before. His horse was a good stout animal, as Belcour had said—one of the best of the Government horses, and able to outrun the ordinary mustang with ease.

The Indians followed close on his heels, but they could not prevent him from reaching the woods ahead of them, when Carl turned into a narrow path, dug in his spurs, and made for the mountains at full speed. Out of sight of his pursuers, in the wood, he gained much more rapidly, as they were forced to go slowly, in order to follow his tracks.

In a very few minutes' rapid gallop he had reached the mountains, and brought up at the foot of a deep, dark ravine, too steep to be ascended on horseback.

For a moment Carl was nonplussed, as he glanced to either side and beheld the same impassable barrier everywhere. But there was no time to be lost. Unlike Belcour, he could not keep his pursuers at bay, for he had purposely left his firearms in the mountains to avoid exciting the suspicions of the Indians, and a single revolver hidden under his shirt was his only weapon, besides the long butcher-knife.

He sprung off the horse in a moment, assisted his companion to dismount, stripped off the bridle, and gave his animal a lash that sent him careering away toward the Indians. Then turning to the steep rocks, he addressed his trembling companion.

"Fraulein," said Carl, gravely, "we are in a bad way, if we do not get oop dieser berg. Canst du climb?"

"Oh, yes, sir," said Clara, trembling; "anything to get away from those wretches! Let us go at once."

"Yakop," said the German, addressing the dog, "show de vay, mein hund."

And little Yakop, with a low whine of joy that told how he relished the fun, darted up the bank ahead, followed by his master and Clara Davis.

It was a terrible hard climb up that bank of rocks. Nearly as steep as the side of a house in places, there were others where the crags crooked out in rude steps, and where stunted bushes and tufts of grass afforded a precarious grasp to the climbers. On they went, little Yakop seemingly gifted with superhuman sagacity in finding out the right way, till at last they reached the summit of the ledge, nearly two hundred feet above the level of the forest, and saw above them the bare mountain-side, furrowed with ravines, just as the Indians arrived within sight of them below.

Without a word, Brinkerhoff seized the girl round the waist, and threw her flat on the ground at the summit of the cliffs, cowering down himself beside her. He was only just in time, for a whole volley of bullets came whistling by them as they went down, the Indians yelling savagely. Brinkerhoff turned and crawled to the edge of the precipice, when he looked over.

The brutal face of Cochise was upturned toward him, and the German felt that when he led the chase, escape would be a hard matter.

Several of the Indians had dismounted, and were advancing to clamber up the rocks on foot; and Carl saw that something must be done.

"If I had but mein *gewehr*," he muttered, regretfully, "I'd fix dem fellers as makes such a noise down dere. Was ist to be done?"

He peeped over, and saw how slow and toilsome was the upward progress of his foes, at the same time that it was perfectly fearless. They clearly supposed him to be unarmed, save for his knife. He looked back, and saw a dark, narrow ravine a little way off, that promised to afford a ready means of escape into the mountain recesses, could he once get rid of his foes below.

"Fraulein," he said, hurriedly, "you goes mit Yakop up dere, und you keeps quiet; den I keeps dese fellows below from commen up hier. You go quick."

But Clara wouldn't go. She said she didn't dare to leave him, and begged him with tears not to make her go, so that Carl was compelled to allow her to stay close to him, though he grumbled fearfully at "de leedle kirls vot don't got no sense, dey doesn't. She vant to get killed und leave me. Vell, you shall stay den. Maybe you be sorry."

He peered over the cliffs, and lo! an Indian warrior was already within five yards of the top!

Carl whipped out his revolver and sternly awaited the approach of the other, ready to shoot him down the moment he should get to the edge of the platform of rock.

Clara Davis said not a word, but lay still, palpitating, while Yakop was licking her hands, just as if he was entreating her not to be afraid.

Carl drew back from the edge of the precipice now, and knelt down on one knee. An expression of great anxiety was on his face, for he was about to try a desperate experiment.

They could both hear plainly the labored breath of their foe as he rested at a stunted bush below the edge of the platform. The sounds of panting a little way beyond announced that others were following him. The Indians seemed to have no fear of a man whom they deemed unarmed, and came steadily up, pistol in hand.

Presently the plumed scalp-lock of the first Indian showed over the edge, and in a moment more, the whole face made its appearance.

As Carl Brinkerhoff started up, an expression of terror came into the savage's face. He had not expected to find the other waiting for him, and up came his hand with a revolver in it instantly.

The stalwart German stepped forward and caught the long black hair in his powerful clutch, when he blew out the savage's brains with his pistol, before a notion could be formed of his intentions.

The body would undoubtedly have fallen down the precipice, but for the firm gripe of the German's left hand. As it was, he dragged it hastily over the ledge, amid a shower of bullets from below, and laid it down.

The Indian, as he had supposed, was loaded with weapons, being a chief of rank, and his rifle had been slung at his back.

"Now, you tammed tiefs, lass mit se gommien hier now," growled Carl, with a snarl.

as he leaned over the edge of the precipice, careless of wasting any more shots now, and began to pick off the rash warriors who were attempting the perilous climb, ignorant of the danger.

The very first shot brought down a man and caused such a remarkably hurried scramble down of the rest, that it seemed as if they, too, had been shot.

"Dot vill do," said Carl, quietly, as he put up his pistol. "Dem von't come *dieser* vay no more, fraulein, so I vill dake dis shentleman's arms, and ve vill go."

He stooped down as he spoke, and removed the arms from the dead body of the Indian chief.

Then, turning with his fair companion, they plunged into the canyon and were lost to sight, just as Cochise gave some order to his men, which sent the whole of them galloping along the foot of the Sierra, searching for an opening.

CHAPTER XXV.

AHSATA.

AT the moment when Belcour and Blanche Davis left the ledge on which they had been riding in full view, and dashed into an unknown canyon to escape from their pursuers, a light, graceful figure made its appearance among the upper peaks of the Sierra, where usually only the ahsata roamed, and paused to overlook the strife in the valley below.

It was the same lonely and supernatural vision that the Indians worshiped as the Spirit of the Sierra.

There she stood in the midst of those wild solitudes, beautiful and ethereal as ever, but we who are near her can see that she is, after all, a deniable flesh and blood, cast in a mold of uncommon beauty and vigor.

She might have looked the huntress Diana of distant ages, swift as the antelope, pure and white as the crescent moon that crowned her forehead, and so she looked, this bright, fairy-like being, who seemed to tread on air at times, so perilous was her path among the dark chasms.

She stood at the very brink of a precipice a thousand feet deep, at the entrance of the same tremendous gorge where Belcour had first seen her. For nearly a quarter of a mile it opened its way into the Sierra, a perfectly perpendicular chasm, with a black torrent, streaked with white foam, far, far below.

Her only footing was one of those stunted, ragged trees that grow here and there out of the sides of the precipice, and she stood there as fearlessly as if on level ground, looking down into the valley, herself unseen. Behind her was a narrow cleft in the rocks that seemed to open into some cave, for she had just emerged from it, and the foliage of the tree entirely concealed her slender figure from view at a distance.

She looked upon a scene of wild commotion in the valley. The Indians were engaged in a furious assault upon the camp of the feeble remnant of the soldiers, which was girt with a ring of horsemen galloping round at full speed, and firing volley after volley in among the wagons.

Turning her eyes to the Sierra, she could command a view of many of the gorges, and saw Belcour ride into one of them with his fair charge, while a strong party of Indians were galloping up a neighboring ravine to intercept them. The girl looked anxiously after them till both had disappeared, when she turned and vanished into the narrow cleft.

That cleft, instead of conducting to a cave, proved to be a short tunnel of nature's make, that pierced the ridge of rock, and emerged on the other side into a circular basin, once the crater of a volcano, in all likelihood. Now it had lost all the stern aspect of its origin, and had become a perfect paradise of beauty.

The southern side of this basin was quite low, admitting the sun into its inmost recesses, while walls of rock rose on the north to protect it from the icy blasts of winter. The character of its vegetation was quite as luxuriant as that of the valley, and wild vines, loaded with grapes, seemed to have been trained by human hands to cover the otherwise naked rocks. In the midst of this singular basin grazed a little flock of mountain sheep with curving horns, all quite tame, for bells were on their necks, and they seemed to be quite fearless of the approach of the girl.

A low building, a sort of hermitage of rough stone, stood in the midst of the basin, and seated on a bench by the door was a venerable old man, with long hair and beard, white as snow.

Like the girl, he was dressed in a garb of the wild sheep-skin, and he seemed to be hale and vigorous beyond his years. The girl addressed him in perfectly pure English, saying:

"Father Clement, there are strangers in distress in the mountains. The two girls that we saw the Indians take yesterday seem to have escaped, for the wretches are now pursuing one of them, and their course will soon bring them to the same place where I saw that youth the night before last. What shall we do?"

"What can we do, Ahsata?" said the old man, in a perplexed tone. "If the Indians chase them they are lost. They can not climb where we are, can they? They are not used to

such exploits. Even I, who have passed these ten years here, fear to find the time coming when my foot will not be as firm, my eyes so sure, as of yore, and I shall be compelled to remain here, while my daughter is compelled to hunt to maintain her poor old preceptor."

"She will do it cheerfully, Father Clement," said the girl, affectionately. "But we shall see many happy years first, my father. Your arm is as strong as ever, your eye as clear as of yore, is it not?"

"Better far," returned Father Clement. "Blessed be the day, my daughter, when we fled from the tents of wickedness to dwell in the mountains. We have found health and strength in the wild struggle for existence, such as I never had in all my life before. But these strangers, Ahsata, where are they?"

"They rode into the middle canyon that leads into the cleft of the cataract," she answered. "There is another one, you know, that comes in higher up, and if the Indians strike on it, the poor fugitives will be hemmed in."

"Let us go there, then, and do what we can," said Father Clement, rising. "We may frighten off their pursuers, but remember that our own secret will be a secret no longer, if we admit the strangers to our home. Have you thought of that, Ahsata?"

"I have," said the girl, firmly, "and I am resolved. We cannot remain here forever, and I must see the world. Who knows, Father Clement? I may find my kindred there, the father and mother I have never seen since I was a baby."

The old man looked shrewdly at her.

"And some one else besides," he said, with a half-sigh. "You have not forgotten the hand-some stranger, I see."

Ahsata blushed crimson, and turned away hastily.

"Come, let us go," she said. "You talk nonsense, Father Clement."

And she tripped rapidly away to the cleft through which she had entered the little basin, while the old man followed.

Through the cleft she flitted, till she stood on the roots of the stunted tree, and then she stood still and listened.

The rattling of musketry in the valley grew less every moment, and peeping through the branches, she could see that the Indians were retiring from the vicinity of the camp, beaten back by the fire of the soldiers.

At the same moment a yell arose in the gorges of the mountains, and Ahsata exclaimed:

"I thought so. The Indians have caught sight of them."

Then she turned round, and detached from a branch above her a cord.

This cord was thin, no thicker than a forefinger. It was composed of the transparent sinews of animals, marvelously strong, and yet almost invisible on the gray face of the rock. It was hung over the branch of the tree, with a stone fastened to the end of it by a hole bored through it. The cord, as the girl strained upon it, proved to be fastened to another stunted tree, that projected out of the rock some sixty feet away from them, and a little above the level on which they stood.

Suddenly, with a bold spring, the girl leaped off into the empty air, still holding the cord. She swung downward over the dizzy void with the smooth, graceful motion of the pendulum, rose again far away, and alighted, like a bird, on a third tree, more than a hundred feet off. The mystery was explained. It was simply the application of the flying trapeze to the problem of crossing that void.

She turned round with a gay wave of the hand, standing alone on the perilous post in mid-air, and cast off the rope, with its weight.

Smoothly and evenly it swung back to the hands of Father Clement, who stood waiting to receive it; and the old man prepared to essay the bold task in his turn. As he did so the girl grasped a second cord, which was stretched on still further, and again she descended, and rose again, in that graceful, easy-looking curve, which was yet so perilous, while the muscular form of her aged preceptor was swinging over the first gap. The two seemed like swallows on the wing, so silent and gliding was the motion, and the second swing brought Ahsata to a pinnacle of rock overlooking the same black gulf into which she had disappeared when first seen by Belcour.

As she paused there, and sent the long cord swinging back to her companion, the sound of shots in the ravine beyond quickened her motions; and she swung across the dark chasm by a third cord, and stood on the same pinnacle of rock on which the conjuror had first seen her.

At that moment he burst in sight on his magnificent black horse, bearing the form of Blanche Davis in front of him, and coming at breakneck speed along the narrow ledge toward the edge of the waterfall.

Ahsata shrunk back out of sight behind a rock, and saw him halt. He looked pale and desperate, for the clatter of horses' feet in the ravine above told of pursuers hard at hand, and escape seemed impossible. He had arrived at the very edge of the waterfall.

He dismounted there and unhesitatingly lifted the

girl off. Ahsata blushed crimson, even in her concealment as she saw him, and heard him say:

"Stand still, young lady, behind the horse. His body and mine will shield you from the bullets. I can keep them off any time here."

Then she saw him run up the pass to a place where the ledge turned round a rock, and the young man deliberately sat down on the rocks and awaited the enemy.

He had not long to wait.

Yelling savagely, and whipping their mustangs, full of exultation at having cornered the fugitives, a long line of savages came galloping down the ledge in full view. No sooner did they come in sight than Belcour's rifle cracked, and the foremost mustang bounded into the air and fell over the precipice with his rider, stone dead.

But the rest were not daunted. They seemed to realize the nature of the desperate task before them, and came on as fast as ever.

Again the rifle cracked, and a second horseman fell, but the rest swept on, so fast that before Belcour could load again, they were close to him.

He leaped to his feet and pulled out his revolver instinctively.

For a few moments the confusion on that ridge was terrible. So narrow was the step of rock that only one could pass at a time, and the conjuror's pistol dealt death to three in as many seconds, each one falling over the precipice as he sunk under the shot.

Then there was a rattle of pistol bullets in return, and Belcour felt himself battered all over the breast on the secret cuirass that he wore, which had saved him from the bullets of Cochise, when he astonished the Indians in the valley. The battery of assault was so severe that he staggered and fell back nearly senseless, while his foes, with a triumphant yell, pressed forward to slay him. Summoning his failing strength, as he lay on the ledge, he raised himself on his arm and emptied his pistol as fast as he could revolve the chambers into the breasts of the foremost heroes.

He was sensible of a crashing as one of them fell forward on him, and then the rider grappled him fiercely. With his last shot Belcour blew the Indian's brains out. At the same moment he heard a great cry as of dismay from the Indians, and a white figure came flying through the air overhead like a bird.

He knew it in an instant for the Spirit of the Sierra.

It lighted on the rocks overhead, and he saw the figure poised a lance.

As the weapon descended and transfixed an Indian, the rest fled with every appearance of terror, and Belcour fainted dead away under the pain of the numerous bruises he had received.

When he came to himself he found Eclair standing over him licking his face, and the Indians were all gone. He was alone in the gorge.

The Spirit of the Sierra had vanished, and with her had also vanished his fair charge, Blanche Davis.

CHAPTER XXVI.

THE OLD COLONEL.

AT noon of the next day the steady tramp of a long column of horsemen echoed among the rocks in a broad gap of the Sierra leading from the Middle to the South Park, and still nearly a day's journey from the latter. The men who rode in that column were perfectly silent, the only sounds audible being the monotonous tramp of the horses, and the occasional clink of a saber scabbard against a spur.

There were several hundred men there, all well armed, and in the center of the column were four brass guns, bright and polished, with their dark, somber limbers and caissons, stern and grim-looking.

At the head of the detachment rode a stout, burly officer, with a short, gray beard, the silver leaves of a lieutenant colonel on his shoulders. In other respects his dress was rude and somewhat slovenly, consisting of a blue sailor's shirt, common soldier's trowsers and high boots, long guiltless of blacking; while his steeple-crowned hat was battered and dented.

He rode a splendid horse in a stiff fashion, his legs quite straight, in the extreme fork seat; but, such as he was, he looked a man to rely on in a heavy fight, safe and cautious to enter, but sticking like grim death when once there.

Such was Colonel Davis of the Eighth Cavalry, a man who had commanded brigades and divisions in hard service a few months before, and who now, like so many others of our noble soldiers, had quietly assumed his subordinate position in obedience to orders, as cheerfully as if he had never worn the shoulder-straps of a major-general.

By his side rode the two cousins, Somers and Buford, in earnest conversation with the colonel, who looked anxious and preoccupied, but as stern and commanding as ever. No one who saw his square, burly figure would have guessed that under that grim exterior was beating a heart torn with the keen anxieties of a father, who knew that his darlings were in the power of such impulsive wretches as the Apaches.

And yet, for all that, the old colonel did not hurry the pace of the column. He rode steadily on at the slashing walk of the old troop horse, but never attempted to quicken the pace, which might distress the animals.

He knew that a long march was before them, and that it was essential that the horses should arrive as fresh as possible.

So the rescue party rode steadily on toward the South Park.

Would they be in time?

Colonel Davis showed no fears, whatever he felt. He was talking to Buford on subjects apparently unconnected with their expedition.

"You see, major," he was saying, "I can not but think it is the same, from your description. Poor Beckford was just such a looking man, tall, thin and bony, with a face like an old bald eagle's. We used to call him Don Quixote in those days. He was a splendid officer, though, as brave as a lion, and full of enthusiasm for his profession. It was a terrible loss to us all when he went crazy."

"But what was the cause, general?" asked Buford, curiously. Colonel Davis was a brevet major-general, and according to the logical (?) custom of our army was "general" in society, while only "colonel" on duty, which made his address a puzzle to the uninitiated.

"The same cause," answered the old colonel, gravely, "which has ruined so many happy homes on the frontier, the infernal wretches of Indians. The peace commissioners come here and pamper them up with high living, issue muskets and ammunition to them, nominally to hunt with, and the hounds use them on us when we are off our guard. Poor Beckford was one of those frank, generous fellows who detested cruelty, and always treated the Indians kindly. His wife and one child were at our post—I was his first lieutenant in those days, major—and Beckford persisted in having his quarters outside the stockade. He had a theory about putting confidence in the Indians, and certainly for a long time they seemed to deserve it. His wife was a perfect angel of goodness to the squalid wretches. Many a time I have seen her among their filthy lodges, nursing the sick, and carrying little delicacies cooked by her own hands to some squaw dying with the small-pox. The Indians all seemed to adore her, and she seemed to have a wonderful influence over them. But it was all a sham. One day Beckford and most of the garrison were out on a buffalo-hunt, and I was left in command, with only a dozen men. Well, sir, a band of Cheyennes, led by a wretch whom I saw Mrs. Beckford rescue from the jaws of death when he lay sick of the small-pox, burst in upon us, attacked the stockade, and put us to our utmost to defend ourselves. Mrs. Beckford and her little girl, only three years old, were caught outside the fort, and we saw the chief himself brain and scalp her, after—well, no matter—you know what devils they are. She was killed at last before our eyes, and the ruffians carried off the child. Beckford came back that night, and found his house in ashes, and his wife's body half-burned up."

"Poor fellow!" exclaimed Somers, involuntarily.

"Well, sir, he dropped like a stone, and we thought he was dead," said the old colonel, in a low voice. "We brought him to at last, but he was quite stupid, and the doctor told us he had brain fever. We did the best we could for him, but he lay delirious three days. The third night, when his nurse, an old negro—his body-servant—was asleep, he disappeared from the fort, and wandered off into the prairie on a bitter cold night in his shirt. We did not discover it till he had been gone several hours, and the falling snow had completely hidden his tracks. We hunted him for three days, and lost two men, frozen to death no doubt, in the search, one of them the black nurse. Till you told me what you did, I believed him certainly dead, for I have never set eyes on him since that night."

"Did you ever hear any thing of him from the Indians?" asked Buford.

"Never a word. If they knew, they kept the knowledge to themselves. If, as I suspect, this is he, his madness must have proved his salvation, and he must have reached the mountains alone and on foot, nearly naked and suffering from fever as he was. But I can hardly believe it. It's thirteen years ago now, and it seems impossible, only no two men like Beckford ever lived."

They rode on silently, musing over the strange story, till Colonel Davis abruptly inquired:

"What makes you think that the two girls were not killed?"

He spoke in a harsh, unnatural tone, the only indication of the burning anxiety which he was so resolutely hiding, but his eye had a haggard, wild look in it, that told of the fears that had devoured him.

"The strange being, who called himself the Rock Rider, insisted that he saw them taken captives," said Somers. "It was he who proposed a rescue, and when we left him, he was about to enter the valley to attempt it."

"What would he do alone?" asked Colonel Davis, half-mockingly, half-hopefully.

"He seemed to be quite confident," said Buford. "He had with him a friend of ours, who is quite a skillful conjuror, and they both seemed to rely on their powers of frightening the Indians more than mere—"

Boom! came a distant gun among the mountains, interrupting their conversation, and the colonel started and listened anxiously.

"They are fighting again," he muttered. "We shall have to hurry up. The horses can stand it."

He turned round in his saddle, and shouted, in his deep, hoarse tones:

"Column trot! March!"

And away went the rescue party on the trail of the distant battle, just as the distant mutter of thunder echoed through the Sierra.

CHAPTER XXVII.

IN THE SIERRA.

THE gaunt, somber figure of the Rock Rider, on his tall mule, stood like the genius of the place at the summit of a sharp crag, overlooking one of the loftiest passes in the Sierra, the heated air trembling around him as from a furnace. He was watching with his eagle eye the movements of a party of Indians in the pass below him, who advanced slowly, examining the rocks as if tracking some one; and on the point of his lance was the fierce, grim-looking head of the Cheyenne chief, Keche-ah-que-kono.

As he looked down, his face lighted with exultation, and he muttered:

"Keep on, red servants of the Evil One, and see how soon ye shall run into the snare that is laid for you! The toils are set, and the hunters are coming. Ye follow but the lure which shall lead you to your destruction. Have ye no ears to hear the horse-hoofs? Be it so. Whom God would kill he hardens in wickedness. Your end approaches. The enemy and the storm are coming alike."

He turned his mule away, and rode along the edge of the crags at a rapid pace, every now and then pausing to look down. The Indians kept on at their task, and soon he perceived a cleft in the sierra running at right angles to the main pass, toward which they seemed to be tending.

"Whom have they there?" muttered the Rock Rider, to himself, as he trotted on. "Surely they cannot have been drawn into such a trap. Yonder ravine ends in a sheer precipice, and if any are in it the savages will have them."

In a moment more he had arrived in front of the opening of the ravine in question, and uttered a low cry of apprehension as he looked.

As he had said, it was a short cleft in the mountain, ending in sheer precipices, and there at the end of it, in plain sight, were two figures, a man and a woman, both lying on the ground, some distance apart from each other, apparently asleep.

The Rock Rider from his lofty station could see them plainly, but he noticed that a pile of rocks lay in front of them, which would no doubt shield them from the view of any one on the same level.

In front of the rocks, lying down, was a small animal, that his quick glance at once recognized as little Yakop, Brinkerhoff's dog.

"Merciful heavens!" muttered the Rock Rider, to himself, "they never reached the camp!"

He looked back at the Indians, and saw that they were still some distance down the pass, slowly but surely advancing. He dismounted from his mule in an instant, and unwrapped from his girdle a long cord, which proved to be nothing but a sling. All his weapons were simple and primitive like himself. Picking up a stone, he placed it in the sling, and cast it with all his might toward the sleeping Brinkerhoff. The distance was nearly a quarter of a mile, but the cliff was high and the slinger strong. The stone dropped with a clatter close to the unconscious German, who started up in a moment.

He saw the Rock Rider when the Indians could not, and when the wild being waved his arms and pointed down the pass, he seemed to realize the meaning of the warning, for he looked to his arms, and took his station behind the pile of rocks immediately.

The Rock Rider made a signal of encouragement, and then mounted his mule again, turned round and trotted off among the peaks at a fast gait.

He had not far to go.

The summit of the pass was already reached, and he looked down among a wilderness of peaks, through which ran a sort of rude road, traversed for millions of years perhaps by the buffalo in their annual migrations.

At the top of the peak he halted, threw himself to the ground and listened.

"The tramp of horses and the rumble of guns," he muttered. "They are close at hand. Can I reach them in time?"

Boom! came the echo of the same gun that had startled Colonel Davis on his road to the rescue, and the Rock Rider started.

"They are attacking the camp again," he

muttered. "Do the fools hope to take it, or are the soldiers short of ammunition?"

Then, as he listened, again his face brightened.

"They hear it, too!" he said. "They are trotting."

And indeed, even an ordinary ear might have detected the deep rumble of guns at a gallop, and the rapid tramp, tramp of the trotting cavalry.

The Rock Rider leaped up and eagerly scanned the wilderness of the Sierra in his front. Soon he began to distinguish a white cloud of dust rising between two of the peaks far ahead.

He shook the rein of his mule and went off at a keen gallop among the rocks down places where it seemed impossible to find a footing, till he finally stood in the midst of the great natural road that connected the Three Parks. Away he went then at a gallop, the trotting of the cavalry becoming plainer every moment, till all on a sudden they burst out of the pass ahead, and came into full sight, their weapons glittering out of a cloud of dust.

The Rock Rider uttered a shout of joy and put his mule down to her steady trot of twenty miles an hour, at which he dashed up to the column with his lance up.

They did not seem to be surprised to see him, for not a man stirred out of the ranks to meet the strange figure, till he had abruptly halted in front of them, when Colonel Davis raised his saber, and shouted: "Halt!"

Then the Rock Rider slowly advanced, an expression of wonder and doubt on his face, at variance with his usual demeanor. He seemed to be half-puzzled, half-disappointed at something.

He threw his lance behind his back, letting it hang on the sling, the grinning head still poised aloft, and abruptly demanded:

"What troops are these?"

To Buford, who had seen him before, the change in his manner was interesting. From a wild, half-crazed mountaineer he had suddenly been changed to a stiff, soldierly-looking officer, slightly imperious, as one accustomed to command.

Colonel Davis gave a military salute, and answered, as he eyed the other with great curiosity:

"Eighth United States Cavalry."

The Rock Rider repeated the words with an accent of slight wonder.

"Eighth United States? These men regulars? Why, sir, when I left the Second Dragoons years ago, they looked like gentlemen, and these are a parcel of dirty ruffians."*

Colonel Davis laughed.

"I know it, sir, but Captain Beckford of today is not the trim Beckford of yore either, is he now?"

The Rock Rider started and eyed the other sharply.

"Who are you?" he said. "Your face is changed, but I know your voice."

"Have you forgotten Tom Davis, Beckford?" said the other, holding out his hand.

"Forgotten Tom Davis? No," said the Rock Rider, looking hard at him. "But you are not Tom Davis. If you were, you would be younger than I, and you look older."

"Years have passed hardly with me, old friend," said Davis, gravely. "Remember that it is thirteen long years since then. It has turned my hair gray, and yours is as black as ever."

The Rock Rider was about to answer, when the sound of shots in rapid succession from among the cliffs in the rear startled both of them. Then he suddenly threw forward his spear, and, with an abrupt toss, sent the head of Keche-ah-que-kono flying among the rocks, when he wheeled round.

"Tom Davis," he shouted, "if it be you, indeed, follow me! Your daughter is in danger, not a mile away. You lost me mine thirteen years ago. Try to save your own now."

And away he went, at full speed, toward the distant firing, with his lance couched straight in front of him.

The father needed no second invitation. He shouted out:

"Column forward! gallop! March!"

Then, with a rush like a whirlwind, away went the whole column of horse, while the black, spiteful-looking carbines were thrown forward by every man, and eager eyes were fixed on the pass.

Somers and Buford, on their swift thoroughbreds, were far ahead of the column by this time, and shot by the tall mule of the Rock Rider with ease, swift though she was.

In a very few minutes they had clattered up to the mouth of the pass from whence the shots proceeded, and wheeled inward. The ravine was full of shouting, shooting savages, galloping

* Lest this remark should be deemed out of place, it may be observed that it is couched in the very words of General Phil Kearney, who returned to his old regiment at the beginning of the rebellion, after a long period of peace. The contrast between the neat uniform of past times and the hideous monstrosity now inflicted on the U. S. troops caused the exclamation. Since the fall of 1872, however, the more hideous features have been abolished and the U. S. uniform restored to decent form, Dec. 1, 1872.

ing to and fro, yelling, but yet held at bay by the determination of a single man, Carl Brinkerhoff, who was firing from his shelter right and left into them.

The appearance of Somers and Buford put a new face on matters as they galloped in. The Indians, taken by surprise, wavered and faltered, and the moment was sufficient to bring the dreaded Rock Rider among them.

He came with his sharp lance aimed at the faces of the warriors, who all dodged it in terror, but that lance was too skillfully wielded to miss its aim, and foe after foe was hurled from the saddle.

And then, with a mighty shout of vengeance and triumph, the dragoons came sweeping into the defile, and the Indians, hemmed in and overpowered, threw down their arms in all directions.

CHAPTER XXVIII. THE LAST CHARGE.

The sun was hanging only a little distance above the western peaks of the Sierra, and the air was hot and sultry, ominous of approaching tempests, when Gustave Belcour emerged from the shelter of the mountains and checked his horse with a word, at the entrance of the South Park.

He had lost his way in the mountains and wandered about till chance had brought him to the Wolf's Mouth Pass, at whose entrance the contest had taken place two days before.

The little corral of wagons remained just where it had been first hurriedly formed at the close of that attack, not two hundred yards from the mouth of the pass, and in full sight of a glittering pool of water, which only mocked the sufferings of the unhappy soldiers. Twice had they attempted to reach that water in their desperation, only to be driven back to their shelter by the overwhelming numbers of their foes.

Belcour noticed that, with fiendish ingenuity the besiegers, while maintaining a close blockade of the camp, carefully left the way open to the tantalizing pool. It seemed as if a rush there might easily succeed, and yet there were hundreds of warriors waiting for just such a movement.

They had concentrated from all parts of the valley into that grim watching circle, and, as he looked, a slow, desultory fire was being kept upon the camp.

He noticed that it was not returned by the soldiers.

The question arose in his mind at once: "Are they out of ammunition, or all dead?"

But they could not be either, or the Indians would have charged, and they seemed to have a great respect for the soldiers still.

"It is lucky they cannot see me," he muttered. "They would never think of searching this pass. I wonder whether Somers and Buford got clear through, and where they are now. If they are coming, they must needs be near by this time. Messieurs, stay where you are but a little longer, and you will get all you want, if the American soldiers are what they used to be when I saw them last year."

Like his friends, Gustave had been an officer of the Union Army, and trusted in its prowess against innumerable Indians.

While he looked, a long shadow swept across the valley, as the sun dipped the edge of his disk behind one of the western peaks of the Sierra.

That shadow seemed to be the signal for the Indians to move. Those who had been standing by their horses instantly mounted, and a furious fusilade was opened on the camp, under cover of which a cloud of warriors swept down on the beleaguered soldiers.

At the head of the storming party Belcour recognized the burly form and scarlet plumes of Cochise, who led in person.

The attack was made with a reckless desperation such as Indians seldom exhibit. It seemed as if they knew that the chances of a rescue increased every moment they delayed, and were determined to capture the train with its valuable freight before the rescue party should arrive.

Belcour watched with intense anxiety the fortunes of the little party, for he knew that on their salvation probably depended his own safety. Nothing had prevented the Indians separating to scour the mountains in search of the fugitives but the superior attractions of the valley.

He saw them dash forward up to the very wagons, firing and yelling, and noticed with dismay that the answering fire was of the feeblest description.

Had he known that the defenders of the corral were to a man fainting with thirst, and so weak as to be unable to fire without a rest, he would not have wondered. And as the attack commenced the sun set.

Already Cochise was hacking away with his sabre at a cord which united two of the wagons, and a crowd of dark figures was clustered around the corral, when the young conjuror heard the quick gallop of a horse's feet in the grass behind him. Instinctively he started round, expecting to see an Indian, and instead

of it beheld the well-known figure of the Rock Rider, dark and fierce-looking in the rapidly gathering shades of night.

He was mounted on his tall mule, which was all covered with foam, and he waved his lance impatiently as he drew up beside Belcour.

"What do you here?" he asked, angrily. "Why stand gazing when every arm and heart is needed in yonder melee? Help is coming, sir, and every moment is precious. Follow me, and I will show you what a Christian knight can do against a million of heathens."

Without another word, he turned and plunged into the valley shouting:

"God and the saints for the Rock Rider! Down with the heathens!"

Belcour hesitated but a moment, and then he drew his pistols.

"I can but die once," he muttered; and down he galloped into the thickening fray, just as a crash announced that a wagon had been overturned, and as the brief twilight ceased as suddenly as if a pall had dropped over the earth.

CHAPTER XXIX. THE FIRE SPIRIT.

IN that tranquil valley the confusion was fearful around the overturned wagon. The sudden darkness which fell over the earth was ominous, for a huge black cloud had risen almost at the moment of sunset, with a suddenness born of the sweeping mountain tempest. The day had been hot and sultry, and now the rumble of thunder, and the dismal howling of a storm gust rose in the western passes, while the black cloud rushed out over the sky with the speed of a whirlwind.

Gustave Belcour found himself tearing down upon the Indians, a revolver in each hand, perfectly regardless of the rashness of the deed, and only inspired by the heroic daring of the Rock Rider, the mad Captain Beckford of Davis's story.

With all the fearlessness of mania, that single man plunged into the midst of the dark, struggling mass of combatants, the long lance dashing its keen point here and there, while the wild war cry rang forth:

"God and the saints for the Rock Rider!"

Then Belcour was into the midst of them himself, Eclair rearing and plunging, kicking and biting, while Gustave scattered the shots of his revolver in all directions.

He was sensible of a terrible commotion, wherein he could hardly tell who was getting the best of the battle. He felt himself struck in the body on the secret cuirass, which had saved his life so often, and reeled upon his charger under the severe blows.

He saw the mad captain, his lance broken, laying about him fiercely with the shattered staff, the Indians bearing back from his tremendous blows.

And then, all at once, a broad glare of red flame lighted up the whole valley, and he saw the faces of his painted antagonists as plain as by daylight. But the Indians looked frightened and overcome with awe at the great light. As if by magic the firing ceased, and every man looked up to the eastern Sierra, whence the light proceeded.

The sight that there met the view was perfectly astounding.

The black cloud had covered the whole of the sky with its inky pall, the wind had hushed for a few moments, and a dead silence, oppressive and awful, reigned over every thing, save for a low, far-off moaning in the gorges.

From the mouth of that very gorge where he had first seen the white figure with the horned head-dress, a great sheet of red flame proceeded.

It was kindled in two huge fires, one on each cliff that formed the sides of the gorge, which overhung the very spot on which they were fighting a moment before.

Out in the full light of the flame stood two human figures, the one a man, with a great white beard, the other a girl, with long golden hair, and both wore the same fantastic garb, with the curving horns of the absata on their heads.

The male figure waved its arms, as if in menace, and shouted down to them through a long trumpet, in the Apache tongue:

"Begone, wretches! The Spirits of the Sierra are angry, and your end is at hand! Flee from the wrath of the Manitou!"

He stooped, and lifting a rounded rock sent it hurtling through the air into the midst of the Apaches, crushing a horse and rider in its fall.

At the same instant the girl flitted to the edge of the precipice, and a bright flame sprung up between the horns of her strange head-dress. She leaped out over the edge of the rock, and walked across the chasm, as if she trod on air, although Gustave could tell from the springy motion that there must be a cord stretched there, invisible to those below.

Arrived at the other side, again she seemed to spring into empty air, and swung off, with the graceful motion of the pendulum, to a pinnacle of rock that shot out of the side of the cliff. From thence, standing like a spirit of fire against a black background, she cast down darts

tipped with flame upon the amazed savages, while the white bearded male figure sent another rock whizzing into the midst of them.

The short pause of open-mouthed wonder was succeeded by yells and cries, as if hell had broken loose, amidst which the rapid gallop of a number of horsemen, with the clatter of weapons, became distinctly audible in Wolf's-Mouth Pass. And then, louder than all, came a sonorous peal of thunder, and a forked streak of lightning shattered a live-oak tree close by the camp.

In an instant the Indians broke and fled, and Belcour was thrown from his horse and overwhelmed by a rush of panic-stricken fugitives, just as the rain came down in a blinding torrent, and the fires on the cliff-tops disappeared as if by magic.

But through the thunder of hoofs he heard ringing out a clear bugle-blast, sounding the well-remembered call of the rescuing cavalry:

"Forward!"

CHAPTER XXX.

CATO.

CLEAR and bright broke the dawn over the romantic South Park the morning after the storm. The mist that filled the valley was thicker than ever, but when the sun cleared it up the scene was beautiful. Every leaf and flower held its gem, and the songs of birds filled the groves.

The Indians had disappeared entirely from the valley, but a trail of dead bodies showed what a merciless slaughter had pursued them during the previous night, even through storm and darkness, to the passes of the Sierra.

The corral of wagons still remained where it had been, but the fires of a numerous body of cavalry soldiers dotted the greensward around the pool that had so long mocked the defenders of the train, and rewarded all their sufferings with its cool waters.

High up on the mountain-side, in the western Sierra, old Black Cato was standing at the mouth of the gorge that led to the Cavern of Death, watching with wonder and alarm the progress of a riderless mule that was coming up the pass toward him.

"Golly sakes alive!" muttered the negro; "wurra dat fur? Dat ole Mountaineer come back all alone, and whar's marse Cappen Beckford? Hyar he been done gone fur two days, and neber a word come to ole Cato, and now hyar come Mountaineer all alone. Suffin' must 'a' happened to marse cappen. Mebbe he want Cato, and send Mountaineer to fetch him. Whar's you come from, ole gal?"

It was strange all this time Cato seemed to have no suspicion that anything more than a mere slight accident had happened to his master. Danger he seemed not to think of. His confidence in that master's prowess was too complete and unswerving.

And now he waited quietly for the mule to come up, anticipating some message from the hand of his beloved captain. Such messages had come to him before.

The mule walked slowly up, and as she came close, began to bray as if in recognition.

"Ha! ole gal, you knows Cato!" exclaimed the negro. "He gibs you de nice wile oats, don't he? an' you want moah. Well, you shall hab 'um, ole gal, so you shall. Now what news you bring?"

The mule came up and rubbed her head against the negro, who cast a hasty glance at the deep Mexican saddle.

That glance was sufficient for Cato.

The next instant he uttered a sort of yell of anguish, and tore his hair in despair.

The whole of the left side of the saddle, from pommel to cantle, was soaked in blood which had freshly dried there, and presented clear evidence of harm to his master.

Cato fell on his knees in a moment, with the pious habits of his race, and prayed aloud with fervor, strangely mixed with despair.

"Oh, Lord, what for you done dis? Oh, Lord, please don't take away good, sweet marse cappen from po' Cato! Oh, wurra is I gwine to do, ef marse cappen's dead? Whar shall I go? Wurra is I to do? Oh, marse cappen, marse cappen, don't you done go die, 'way from po' Cato! Little Missy Evy she gone, missis she gone, an' is you gwine, too, to leave po' Cato? Oh, it can't be! It shan't be! Ise gwine arter him, ef it kills Mountaineer. Oh, Mountaineer, good ole gal! take me to marse cappen, do! Dat's a good ole gal, and I gibs you all de corn you wants fo' you' life, ef you does it, shuah!"

He jumped up from his knees with nervous hurry, as he said the last words, and tightened the mule's girths. Mountaineer seemed to know what was required of her, for she turned round and trotted off with Cato as cheerfully as if fresh from a stable, and soon brought him into the valley of the South Park, by the same glade where Belcour had found Eclair, two days before.

Cato was quite unaware of the changes that had taken place in the valley the previous night. The driving storm had drowned the sounds of the rifle-shots, and he knew not but what the Indians were still there. In any event, he had only one object in view, and that was to see his master, and die with him if need be. Cato was

one of the old type of slaves, faithful to death; and to him and his master, buried in those solitudes for thirteen years, the war and its resulting emancipation were entirely unknown.

His surprise then was no greater than his joy, at seeing the valley clear of foes, and the United States flag floating over the wagons in the corral.

"Oh, bress de Lord!" cried Cato. "Mebbe marse cappen not dead, affah all. Dar de deah ole flag once moah, an' de sojers what Cato mebbe see no moah for ten, twenty yeah. Oh, bress de Lord! I'se gwine to see marse Cappen Beckford once moah, like a *real cappen* on a *hoss*, not on dem po' trash of mules. An' den I gets Mountaineer, mebbe."

The revulsion in his spirits was as great as had been the depression. For a moment he had forgot the ominous blood-stains on Mountaineer's saddle, and rejoiced at the sight of arms, as none but an old camp-follower can do. He galloped into the camp, with a broad grin on his black face, showing every tooth in his head, with delight, and yelling:

"Bress de Lord, oh my soul! Whar's marse Cappen Beckford? Oh, gemmens, isn't I glad to see ye, *jest*? Oh, whar's marse Cappen Beckford? Somebody tell me, or I'se gwine to bu'st!"

The soldiers looked up laughing from the fire, and a roar of merriment spread through the camp, as the grotesque-looking negro, in his garb of skins, mounted on the scraggy mule, careered through the camp.

But Mountaineer appeared to know where she was going, for she held on steadily till she halted by the fire where a group of officers were standing.

Cato jumped off as the officers turned round, and peered anxiously into the face of every one there. Then he turned away disappointed, muttering:

"He'm not dar. Whar de debbil is he?"

"Here, my man, what do you want?" asked a stern voice, as Colonel Davis beckoned him forward from the group.

Instantly, as with the long forgotten habit of discipline, Cato doffed his cap respectfully, and stood twiddling it between his hands, as he hesitatingly said:

"Please, marse colonel, I'se come to—see, marse colonel—if I kin find ole marse Cappen Beckford 'mong you gemmen—I begs parding, gemmen—"

The colonel advanced eagerly a pace, and laid both hands on Cato's shoulders, whom he scrutinized attentively.

Then he let go and muttered:

"My God! It's Cato! Alive and well! Wonders will never cease."

"Yes, marse colonel," said Cato, doubtfully, respect struggling with a desire to recognize the other, "Cato is 'live, sah, but I doesn't quite exactly 'member you, sah. 'Scuse me, sah."

"What, Cato, have you forgotten Lieutenant Davis, you rascal? Don't you remember who caught you stealing his whisky, and kicked you down the quartermaster's steps?" asked the colonel, with a half-laugh at the recollection.

Cato changed instantly, and set up a counter-yell of his own laughter.

"Oh, now I recklex, marse Davis! Golly! how mad you was, marse Davis! An' how we black fellers got square for dat kickin', de ve'y nex' day! Yah! yah! yah! marse Davis, how you did go on, *suh*, when you foun' all you' hams and chickens gone, an' nobody do'no' nuffin' bout it, oh, no—'twar de coyotes as steal 'um. Yah! yah! yah!"

The howl of laughter with which Cato greeted the remembrance was contagious. It set all the officers laughing in turn, whether they understood the joke or not, and the stout colonel laughed as loud as any. But Cato suddenly remembered his manners, and pulled up short with remarkable promptness.

"Beg parding, marse Davis," he observed, "but I'se forgot. Does you know whar marse Cappen Beckford is, sah? I'se come fo' to see him."

The colonel's countenance instantly grew grave. A sudden, painful memory seemed to come over him, and he said, kindly:

"Your master is dangerously wounded, Cato, and he lies in yonder tent, attended by my daughter. Go to him at once, and some other time you shall tell me how you escaped when we thought you frozen to death, and where you and your master have been all these years."

Of all this address Cato only seemed to realize the first sentence. He stood stupidly, muttering:

"Dange'ously woonded. Oh, Heavenly Father! Wurra dat for?"

But he seemed to understand where to go, for he moved off slowly toward a large wall-tent, pitched close to the wagons, and raising the flap, entered, to find his beloved master extended on a camp-bed, pale and half asleep, with blood-stained bandages on his left thigh, while a pretty young lady sat watching by the bedside, weeping softly to herself.

Cato uttered a low groan of mortal grief and terror at that sight, and poor Beckford opened his eyes.

Those eyes had lost the wild, excited look

they formerly wore, and large, dark and serious, they gazed on Cato, as the wounded man said, in a low voice:

"The dream has come true, Cato, but not as I thought. I shall soon see Evy now, but it will be in Heaven, for my eyes are opened, and I am dying."

Cato dropped on his knees and burst into a tempest of convulsive sobs as the wounded captain spoke.

CHAPTER XXXI.

RED LIGHTNING'S STORY.

COLONEL DAVIS was standing thoughtfully gazing at the fire. He had regained one of his daughters, but the other was as yet missing. His only clew to her whereabouts was the statement of Belcour, who had told him of the mysterious disappearance of Blanche Davis, when he himself was struck down senseless by the Indians. Belcour and Brinkerhoff had gone off that very morning with Somers and Buford to explore the glen where the wonderful Spirit of the Sierra had been first seen, and little Yakop had accompanied them, in the hope that canine sagacity might discover a clew where human wisdom failed.

The bluff colonel, full of concealed impatience, was yet to all outward appearance impassive and calm, while awaiting the result of their discoveries, and listening attentively for the rifle-shot that was to be the signal that they had arrived at the glen.

In the meantime he issued the necessary orders for patrolling the valley and the neighboring passes, to guard against annoyance from any lurking Indians who might be disposed to revenge their recent discomfiture. There were some twenty prisoners, besides—among them the Comanche chief, Red Lightning, who had been badly wounded in the charge the night before—and the colonel wished to examine them.

He sent for Red Lightning, and the chief was brought up on a stretcher. He had been shot through the lungs, not far from the heart, and had not long to live; yet his eye was as bright and clear, his face as calm and impassive, as if he was free from pain. His voice, too, though low and husky, was perfectly steady, and he answered the officer's questions like one not afraid to die. The colonel had been long enough on the plains to talk all the Indian dialects.

"Red Lightning," said the colonel, in his gruff but by no means unkindly tones, "I am sorry to meet you here. The great father trusted you as a chief of your tribe, and you have received many presents."

Red Lightning smiled faintly.

"If I have done wrong, kill me," was all he said. "Red Lightning is not afraid to die."

"You are dying now," said Colonel Davis, sternly. "It is the end of all bad Indians. Who tempted you on this war-path?"

"The Comanche is poor, and needs guns," said the chief, laconically.

"And you thought to take them from a train guarded by the soldiers of the great father? See what you have got by it. Where is Cochise? He was with you, and there were Cheyennes among the dead."

An expression of anger flitted across Red Lightning's face.

"The Apaches are howling coyotes," he said. "Cochise is great in talk, but he flees when there is work to be done. Had the Apaches seconded us, I should not be here now at your mercy."

Colonel Davis looked earnestly at the Indian. A sudden thought came into his head as he asked:

"And the Cheyennes, what did they?"

"The Cheyennes were no use, for their chief was dead. Keche-ah-que-kono fell by the lance of the Black Spirit that rose among the rocks. They feared the Spirits of the Sierra, and shrank from the contest. I alone had the heart big enough to meet him, and I shot him down."

"Was Keche-ah-que-kono the Cheyenne chief?" asked Colonel Davis, in a tone of interest. "See here, Red Lightning, you know now who the Black Spirit, as you call him, was, and you remember when the captain shot his wife and daughter, for your band visited us the day before. Tell me what became of the child, and I give you your liberty."

Red Lightning looked at the other.

"It is too late, white chief," he said. "Red Lightning is on the way to the hunting grounds of his fathers, and the white medicine-men cannot stop him. Keche-ah-que-kono was a dog, and did the deed of a coyote. He bit the hand that bad fed him. No Comanche ever did that."

"Tell me, then," said the colonel, anxiously, "do you know what became of the girl?"

"Keche sold her to the Apaches, and she lived with them for two years," said the chief. "Then she escaped, along with the Black Father."

"The Black Father! who was he?"

"The Black Father who spoke big words from the Great Spirit. He came from the East, all alone, and taught the Apaches many wonderful things. But he told Cochise that he must stop taking scalps, and Cochise wanted to kill him, but was afraid, because the warriors loved him. But one night the Black Father was miss-

ing, and with him went the little white flower. No man has ever seen them since."

While the colonel was musing in silence over his strange story, and trying to identify this "Black Father," that the chief spoke of (probably some Roman Catholic missionary from the description), the sound of a rifle-shot echoed from the gorge in the Sierra above them.

With an instinctive start, the old colonel turned to look up.

There was the tremendous gap illuminated by a flood of early sunlight, which made a glittering rainbow of the waterfall at the end, and shone upon the group of four figures clustered above it.

The four searchers were at the foot of the fall, and simultaneously with the rifle-shot, out on the stunted tree in the midst of the precipice started the light, fairy-like figure of Ahsata.

CHAPTER XXXII.

THE MYSTERY SOLVED.

GUSTAVE BELCOUR was the first to reach the waterfall at the mouth of the haunted glen, and it was he that discharged the rifle-shot which announced their arrival to the camp below. The next to follow was Carl Brinkerhoff, and little Yakop came bustling past the horse's feet and halted at the edge of the waterfall, whining, as if he wanted to go over but dared not.

The four comrades (for Somers and Buford were close behind) looked doubtfully at the sheer walls of precipice before them, and Brinkerhoff observed:

"Himmel! How we ever gets up dere! Dis leedle kal must be wonderfull leedle kal to life hier."

At that very moment Belcour uttered an exclamation of satisfaction and delight, for the figure of Ahsata made its appearance in full sight, and, for the first time, the four comrades had a full view of that wondrous beauty, which they had hitherto only seen by glimpses at a distance.

Not a word was uttered as they stood gazing spellbound at her; and then, all of a sudden, the girl came flying toward them, graceful and fearless, a hundred feet at each swing, till she stood on the pointed rock above the waterfall and looked down in silence on them.

Then the spell was broken, the mystery revealed.

Slight and almost invisible as were the suspending cords, they could yet trace them like spiders' threads, and understood it in a moment.

"Der flying trapeze," muttered Carl, who was an old "turner."

"Why did I never think of it before?" murmured Belcour. Then he raised his hat in a profound salutation, and addressed Ahsata, saying:

"Mademoiselle, whoever you are, believe me, it is not impudent curiosity that has drawn us here. Yesterday I was overpowered and stunned by Indians in this pass, and, when I came to, the young lady who had been with me was gone. Tell us, mademoiselle, did the Indians carry her off, or have you rescued her?"

The girl stood looking earnestly at him, all this while. When he had finished, she answered, in a sweet, clear voice:

"She is here. What would you with her?"

"Her father, Colonel Davis, arrived in time to rescue her sister, last night," said Belcour. "He is very anxious to see his daughter if you will permit it, mademoiselle."

Ahsata seemed to hesitate a moment. Then she said:

"Can you follow me by the road I came, sir?"

"I think so, mademoiselle."

"Then lay down your arms, leave your companions and come to me."

Belcour was off his horse in a trice, and delivered over his weapons to his comrades. He had not expected such an easy conquest of the shy creature.

She threw down to him the end of a rope, by which he ascended to the rock on which she stood, and she addressed him in a cold, business-like tone:

" Swing over to yonder tree," she said; "and then throw me back the rope."

Belcour was a pretty fair gymnast, but he hesitated a moment to take the leap over such a frightful chasm. Ahsata laughed.

"Give me the rope," she said. "I will go first."

In a moment she was swinging over the giddy void, and in another, back came the rope full swing.

Belcour, ashamed of himself, caught it and followed her. All that the feat required was boldness, and he lighted on the tree beside the girl in safety. She smiled encouragingly and observed:

" You do well for the first time. I remember when I was afraid. But now we must take the second swing. Hang the stone over that branch and then come on."

He obeyed her in silence and the second great swing took him to the midst of the precipice, where the girl had already left the station and stood at the entrance of the cleft, ready to send back the rope.

The Rock Rider.

In two minutes more he stood by her side at the entrance of the crater of the extinct volcano, and beheld Blanche Davis and father Clement advancing to meet them.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

CONCLUSION.

A MOURNFUL group was gathered at sunset around the tent which held the couch of the wounded Beckford. The sides of the tent were looped up to admit the cool breeze, and the injured man was propped up with pillows.

Colonel Davis, Major Morris, and one or two gray-headed officers, all old comrades of the poor captain, were clustered about him, with sad faces, while the colonel's daughters supported him on either side, weeping unrestrainedly.

At the foot of the bed stood Father Clement and Ahsata.

The girl seemed to be strangely moved, as she gazed at the dying officer, and he, on his part, was looking back at her with eager intensity, while Father Clement spoke:

"I can not say for a certainty, sir, who she is. That she comes of white parents you can see for yourself, but the Apache chief, Cochise, owned her for a slave at the time that the superior of our order sent me on a mission to the tribe ruled over by that chief. I noticed the poor child in her lonely degradation, beaten, abused and overworked, and tried my utmost to better her condition. I had some success with the warriors of the tribe, but Cochise himself remained stolid and fierce as ever, and finally my life was threatened by him unless I left the tribe. Now, you know that a missionary is bound to suffer martyrdom if necessary, if thereby he can save a soul; but, alas, gentlemen, I could not say for certain that a single warrior of that stubborn tribe had been fully converted. The only creature who had listened to me with clear understanding was this captive child, and her I felt bound to save if I could. I fled in the night with her, and sought refuge in the mountains, where we have now lived for nearly twelve years in peace."

"It had been my fortune in my youth to become a skillful gymnast, and I put the lessons I had learned in practice now, and taught them to my pupil. Like Alexander Selkirk, long ago, vigorous health and constant practice enabled me to run down the wild goat of the mountain, when the powder and lead I had brought away from the Apache camp failed us. Making ropes of the sinews of animals, I succeeded in swinging over chasms that otherwise no human being could have faced. It was well for us that I made those ropes, for their use finally enabled us to reach an otherwise inaccessible retreat, where the Apaches could not pursue us. They hunted us very closely at first, but God gave us strength to keep out of their way, and the mystery of our final departure aroused their superstition. I took advantage of this by frequently appearing at night, and swinging along the face of the precipice with a pine torch fixed in my cap. My pupil and I put on our present garb, partly for convenience of climbing, partly to increase the mystery. She has become far more active than I was in my best days, as much at home among the rocks as the Ahsata I have named her after. Latterly, since the white people have visited the valley, we have staid in our own retreat to avoid notice, living on the milk of our little flock, which we increase from time to time by capturing kids. If it had not been for the Indians chasing yonder young lady to our very doors, you would never have seen us; but we could not stand by and see her murdered. So we took advantage once more of the Indian superstition, frightened them away, and carried off the young lady with some difficulty, for I had to carry her in my arms on the great swing. But now I suppose our retreat is discovered, and we shall have no more peace till we return to civilization."

"Certainly not," said Colonel Davis. "You have done me too much service to be allowed to rusticate there any longer; and as for this young lady, if what Red Lightning tells me, be true, Beckford, you are right in your conjecture. I see it in both your eyes. The Cheyenne dog who stole your daughter sold her to the Apaches, and beyond a doubt the little white captive who escaped to the mountains, and became known as the Spirit of the Sierra, is none other than—"

"Evelyn Beckford! My own lost little Evy!" cried Beckford, half rising from his couch.

The girl started as she heard the name, and seemed to be struggling to remember something.

"Who calls me Evy?" she murmured, faintly.

Then, suddenly, old Cato leaped up from where he had been crouched at the head of the bed, unseen, and yelled out:

"Miss Evy! Miss Evy! Don't ye know ole Cato, what used to carry you 'bout when you was little pickanninny? Oh! bress de Lord, marse cappen, for you ain't crazy no mo', and we're foun' little Miss Evy 't last!"

Beckford did not die, reader. Joy saved him, even with a shattered thigh-bone, the most dangerous of all wounds. But his recovery was

very slow, and the assiduous attentions of Belcour, who was a physician among his other accomplishments, went far toward saving him.

But he recovered and became rational again, retiring from the army, and living in New York with his son-in-law, in peace and quiet. Who that son-in-law was is easily told. The mutual admiration that sprung up in the bosoms of Belcour and Evelyn Beckford, when they first met in the haunted gorge, bore its fruit in due time, in a wedding. Somers and Buford are still bachelors, farming in California, but honest Carl Brinkerhoff has settled down as a practicing architect in New York, and has married Clara Davis. Little Yakop is grown fat and lazy now, and sneaks under the sofa when you ask him to perform any of his tricks; but, as old Cato remarks:

"Ef it hadn't a' been fur dat ar' dog, Marse Brinkerhoff wouldn't nebbah have got off wid him wife so easy, and Marse Billycur wouldn't nebbah have found out de way to get 'nudder fur herself, fur ef Miss Blanshy Davis hadn't been dar, Miss Evy wouldn't nebbah have come down out of dat ar' hole in de rocks whar dem ignorant red niggers of Injuns used to call her not'ing but de SPIRIT OF DE SIERRA."

THE END.

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